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An “All Star” Initiative: Maximizing Consumer Interest at Premier College Wrestling Events

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During the past 25 years, men’s wrestling programs have suffered more program eliminations than any other nonrevenue sport team at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) level (The NCAA News, 2006). While there were 363 NCAA wrestling programs offered to potential student-athletes in 1981 (The NCAA News, 2006), the number of men’s wrestling programs provided by the NCAA has diminished to 220 in 2008 (Moyer, 2009). With the struggling economy and the implications of the “arms” race (Christy, Seifried, & Pastore, 2008; Kennedy, 2007), the National Wrestling Coaches Association (NWCA) and advocates of amateur wrestling must develop strategies to enhance the sustainability of college wrestling for future years. Thus, the research utilized the motivational preference literature as a guide to survey fans (N = 149) at the NWCA All Star Classic in an effort to improve promotional opportunities at future college wrestling events. Overall, the results illustrated that fans responded most favorably to the following motivational preferences: achievement, individual match-ups, and loyalty. Further, the research also utilized participant’s demographic information to identify the segmented motivational preferences exhibited by fans attending the event.

During the past 25 years, a myriad of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletic directors have set an unfortunate precedent when making the decision to eliminate nonrevenue sport programs to maximize their financial endeavors (Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003). As explained by Ridpath, Yiamouyiannis, Lawrence, and Galles (2008), the “loss of college wrestling teams arguably can be found in out-of-control and unfair economics in big-time college athletic programs” and the “reallocation of money from some men’s sports (such as wrestling) to other men’s sports (such as football, basketball, and even baseball)” (p. 278). While men’s Olympic sport programs have suffered most severely in program discontinuations (The NCAA News, 2006), recent trends support the notion that even women’s programs are not safe in today’s increasingly competitive intercollegiate athletic environment. For example, in 2006,

James Madison University stated monetary constraints from Title IX when making the decision to eliminate seven men's and three women's Olympic sport teams (Dopirak, 2006). With the program discontinuations in mind, the unfortunate truth is that many student-athletes have been denied participation opportunities due to the fact that college athletics has become such a major commercialized entity.

When focusing on the program eliminations within the NCAA during the past 25 years, there is no nonrevenue sport program that has suffered more losses in participation opportunities than men's wrestling (The NCAA News, 2006). While there were 363 NCAA wrestling programs offered to potential student-athletes in 1981, the number of men's wrestling programs provided by the NCAA had diminished to 220 in 2008 (Mike Moyer [Executive Director of NWCA], personal interview, January 26, 2009). Ultimately, with an average estimated squad size of 30 student-athletes, these 143 program eliminations equate to an annual loss of 4,290 participation opportunities for the 256,509 high school wrestlers (NWCA Facts, 2009) featured throughout the United States. Further, the trend seems to be increasing as the following four college wrestling teams were eliminated in the first few weeks on 2009: Lawrence University, Norwich University, Portland State University, and Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology (Moyer).

While the past program eliminations are alarming, there is escalating concern for college wrestling programs considering athletic departments are now facing more significant economic deficiencies (Drape & Evans, 2008). Currently, athletic departments across the United States are being challenged with declining financial revenue sources due to the fact that many boosters, corporate sponsors, and consumers have less discretionary income (Drape & Evans). Thus, with the struggling economy and the implications of the "arms race" (Christy, Seifried, & Pastore, 2008; Kennedy, 2007), there is no question that nonrevenue teams such as men's wrestling are facing diminishing financial support (James & Ross, 2004) and related program eliminations if revenues are not increased in college wrestling programs in future years.

Unfortunately, the expected decrease in the financial support provided to nonrevenue sport teams (James & Ross, 2004) is a reality of the profit maximization environment that has been fostered in college athletics (Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003). If today's college wrestling programs are going to realize any measure of sustainability, there must be an initiative by the National Wrestling Coaches Association (NWCA) and advocates of college wrestling to build consumer interest for the college wrestling product at its member institutions. Ultimately, if college wrestling is going to exist in what has become a profit-driven athletic environment, then the revenues realized by the men's wrestling programs must be maximized so that athletic departments are not being "forced" to fund the programs. Thus, there are clearly some daunting tasks for the NWCA and advocates of college wrestling in future generations.

The National Wrestling Coaches Association

The National Wrestling Coaches Association (NWCA) is a professional organization founded in 1928 that is dedicated to providing service and leadership that focuses on the advancement of college wrestling and its member institutions (NWCA Mission, 2009). In recent years, with the devastating program eliminations (The NCAA News, 2006), the NWCA has

focused heavily on implementing strategies to enhance the sustainability of college wrestling at all levels. One strategy that the NWCA has implemented revolves around the creation of two essential events that aid in the development of consumer interest in the college wrestling product: the NWCA All Star Classic and the Cliff Keen/NWCA National Duals. In particular, the All Star Classic has added significant value to amateur wrestling because it serves as a “kick off” event for college wrestling as it showcases amateur wrestling’s heroes and champions all across the country (Moyer, personal interview, January 26, 2009). Thus, in addition to serving as a catalyst to build consumer interest in the upcoming college season, it also aides in the development of casual fan interest in strategic locations¹ across the United States. Further, because it is an event that attracts many segments of the wrestling community, the All Star Classic serves as an excellent context to examine the consumer preferences for wrestling that may apply to other wrestling meets including college dual meets.

The NWCA All Star Classic is a specialized event that is critical for building interest (and related revenues) in college wrestling in future generations. With the program eliminations facing college wrestling and its member institutions (The NCAA News, 2006), it is absolutely necessary for the NWCA to find ways to build consumer interest in the college wrestling product. In addition to implementing grassroots marketing efforts through coaches at the local level (Moyer, personal interview, January 26, 2009), the NWCA must also develop strategies to build the sport through innovative promotions at high profile wrestling events. In order to achieve this objective, it is essential that the NWCA and advocates of college wrestling have a clear understanding of the motivational preferences of consumers attending college wrestling events.

Motivational Preferences for Consumption

In the existing sport management literature, several scholars have emphasized the importance of understanding the motivational preferences of consumers when attempting to maximize interest in sport events (Chelladurai, Harada, & Matsuoka, 2003; Cooper, in press; James & Ross, 2004; Trail, Fink, & Anderson, 2003; Trail, Robinson, Dick, & Gillentine, 2003). While early research focused on the unique identification of consumer motivational preferences (Cialdini et al., 1976; Sloan, 1989), recent studies have attempted to create a more directed understanding of fan consumption through the creation of scales encompassing the unique reasons why individuals attend sport events (Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2000; Trail & James, 2001; Wann, 1995).

In addition to the identification of unique consumer preferences included in motivational scales (e.g., Sport Fan Motivational Scale [SFMS]) (Wann, 1995), scholars have also utilized the previous research to identify the varying reasons for attendance among fans attending different sport events (James & Ridinger, 2002; Wann, Schrader, & Wilson, 1999). In an analysis of multiple sport events, Wann demonstrated that fans attending basketball games were significantly more attracted by the chance to spend time with family than individuals attending baseball and football events. Further, James and Ridinger explained that spectators at women’s basketball games were more influenced by the action and escape aspect of the event than their counterparts attending the men’s games.

In order to gain a more segmented understanding of fan consumption habits, researchers have also emphasized the importance of understanding the variations in motivational preferences when focusing on the demographic background information of consumers (Armstrong, 2002; Kwon & Trail, 2001). In an initial assessment of preferences based on demographics, Wann et al. (1999) illustrated that men had a much higher motivational preference than women on the following three motivational subscales: eustress, self-esteem, and aesthetics. Further, Armstrong and Kwon and Trail provided additional insight into market segmentation when demonstrating that an individual's cultural background (e.g., American versus International) and ethnicity (e.g., African-American versus Native American) had an impact on their reasons for attending sport events.

Motivational Preferences in Nonrevenue Sport Events

With a significant amount of athletic departments' budgets allocated to men's basketball and football (NCAA Financial, 2009), scholars have emphasized the distinct need to identify strategies to enhance consumer interest in nonrevenue sport events (Funk, Mahony, & Ridinger, 2002; James & Ross, 2004). In a pioneer study focusing solely on nonrevenue sport teams, James and Ross reported the motivational preferences among consumers attending the following sport events: men's baseball, men's wrestling, and women's softball. While there were some slight variations in the findings within the study, the data supported the notion that consumers of nonrevenue sport teams all rated the sport-related motives (e.g., entertainment, skill, drama, and team effort) higher than the motives related to self-definition (e.g., achievement, empathy, and team affiliation) and the motives related to personal benefits (e.g., social interaction and family). Thus, the findings provided a framework for direct comparison when analyzing nonrevenue sport events such as men's wrestling.

In addition to the examination of multiple nonrevenue sport events at the local level (James & Ross, 2004), research has also recently investigated the motivational preferences at specialized wrestling events (Cooper, in press). In an analysis of a major conference wrestling tournament, Cooper determined that individuals from top tier schools (e.g., Iowa, Minnesota) were more attracted by team affiliation than those from second tier schools (e.g., Indiana, Purdue). Thus, the historical success at top tier schools allows them to draw consumers simply by highlighting the team affiliation aspect of their program. In contrast, because of the lack of tradition at second tier schools, sport managers must be more creative when packaging their product for consumers. A primary example involves the promotion of top individual wrestlers within second tier programs.

While the previous research on motivational preferences at conference tournaments is useful when attempting to create interest in the college wrestling post-season, there are additional initiatives at the national, regional, and local levels that need to be realized if college wrestling is going to be sustainable in future generations. In particular, there is a dire need to improve marketing efforts at regular season dual meets during the college wrestling season. Further, the college wrestling product would also benefit if specialized "All Star" events (e.g., Cliff Keen Las Vegas Invitational, Midlands Championships, NWCA All Star Classic, NWCA National Duals) were positioned more effectively to attract consumers. The current research offers a unique

opportunity to achieve both objectives by examining the consumption habits of individuals attending a specialized “All Star” dual meet at the local level. Thus, the purpose of the research was to investigate the motivational preferences of consumers attending the NWCA All Star Classic in order to improve promotional efforts at specialized college wrestling events in future years.

Methodology

Instrument

The current research utilized a 19-item questionnaire to investigate the consumption preferences of individuals attending the wrestling event. Similar to the research by Cooper (in press), the Wrestling Consumer Preference Scale (WCPS) was utilized as the core foundation for the study. In addition to the six items from the WCPS (achievement, entertainment, individual match-ups, individual wrestler affiliation, social, and team affiliation), the study also attempted to gain a stronger understanding of consumer preferences by including wrestling specific motives. Based on a review with a panel of Division I wrestling experts (four college wrestling coaches, four college wrestlers, and two college wrestling research experts), the decision was made to include the follow items within the instrument: learning opportunity² and wrestling loyalist³. In order to analyze the data, a six-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=moderately disagree, 3=slightly disagree; 4=slightly agree, 5=moderately agree, 6=strongly agree) was utilized to determine participant’s level of agreement with motivational preferences included within the questionnaire.

Following the inclusion of the two new motives, the survey was thoroughly examined by the panel to ensure validity throughout the instrument. Further, in order to establish reliability in the instrument, the Cronbach Alphas (α) were calculated for each of the motivational factors included in the survey. The results of the analysis revealed that each of the coefficients exceeded the benchmark value of .70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Thus, the results provided initial evidence of internal consistency for exploratory research on motivational preferences.

Data Collection

The survey instrument was distributed by four trained individuals during the NWCA All Star Classic event. In order to ensure a representative sample, a random systematic sampling method was implemented by distributing the survey to every 5th participant at two of the main entrances in the venue. The distribution started two hours prior the event and it ended following the cessation of the heavyweight event. In total, of the 159 surveys that were distributed to consumers, there were 149 (93.7%) that were returned and deemed usable for the current research. With an attendance of approximately 1,400 adults at the event, the sample was representative of 10.6% of the individuals who attended the All Star Classic. Thus, the stratified sampling method provided a strong foundation to understand the motivational preferences of consumers attending the event.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were utilized in an effort to gain a thorough understanding of the motivational preferences exhibited by fans at specialized college wrestling events. In particular, the data analyses calculated the means on each of the motivational scales to afford a broad understanding of the reasons why individuals chose to attend the event. Further, with a strong emphasis on segmentation in today's competitive sport environment, a one-way ANOVA was implemented to investigate the variation in motivational preferences based on the background information (e.g., age, income, wrestling affiliation) of individuals attending the event. Thus, the statistical analyses offered an opportunity to enhance promotional efforts at future wrestling events.

Results

The initial analysis of the data revealed the mean motivational preferences for the individuals who attended the event. As shown in Table 1, the results illustrated that fans responded most favorably to the individual match-ups ($M = 5.73$, $SD = 0.74$) and achievement ($M = 5.37$; $SD = 1.11$) offered during the meet. Further, the data supported the notion that the fans also attended the event as wrestling loyalists ($M = 5.35$; $SD = 1.07$) looking for the opportunity to support college wrestling. In contrast, when investigating the remaining motivational preferences, the results demonstrated that fans had the least interest in the learning opportunity ($M = 3.96$; $SD = 1.69$) and social aspects ($M = 3.94$; $SD = 1.59$) of the event.

Table 1 - *Descriptive Statistics for Wrestling Fan's Responses to Sport Fan Motives*

Responses	Mean	Standard Deviation
Sport Fan Motives (N = 149)	4.77	1.34
Achievement	5.37	1.11
Entertainment	5.00	1.17
Individual Match-Ups	5.73	0.74
Individual Wrestler Affiliation	4.53	1.57
Learning Opportunity	3.96	1.69
Social	3.94	1.59
Team Affiliation	4.30	1.76
Wrestling Loyalist	5.35	1.07

Note: The scale ranged from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (6)

In addition to the overall motivational preferences, the findings also illustrated the segmented responses provided by fans when focusing on their background information. In particular, the ANOVA revealed that the affiliation of fans (e.g., college wrestling coach, high school wrestler) had a significant influence on their preference for the learning opportunity ($F_{6, 148} = 3.803, p < .01$) motive. More specifically, high school coaches and wrestlers were more attracted by the opportunity to learn new wrestling strategies and techniques than other casual fans attending the event. Furthermore, the findings also demonstrated that younger generations of fans were less influenced by the entertainment ($F_{5, 148} = 2.822, p < .05$) and team affiliation ($F_{5, 148} = 2.833, p < .01$) motives than older generations of fans.

Fan Responses to All Star Classic Product

In order to improve the product offered to consumers at future wrestling events, the survey also asked fans to provide feedback on their level of satisfaction with the wrestling product being offered by the NWCA. As shown in Table 2, while fans were highly satisfied with the core product (e.g., quality of individual match-ups [$M = 8.62; SD = 1.99$] and individual wrestlers [$M = 8.80; SD = 1.97$]), they reported less satisfaction with the following promotional aspects of the event: availability of event information ($M = 6.81; SD = 2.62$), event date ($M = 6.66; SD = 3.07$), and promotions ($M = 5.71; SD = 2.85$). Thus, the results indicated that a large portion of fans had a somewhat poor perception of the promotional aspects of the event.

Table 2 - *Descriptive Statistics for Wrestling Fan's Satisfaction with All Star Classic Product*

Responses	Mean	Standard Deviation
All Star Classic Product (N = 149)	7.46	2.46
Availability of Event Information	6.81	2.62
Diversity of Teams	7.63	2.09
Event Location	8.53	2.25
Event Date	6.66	3.07
Quality of Individual Match-Ups	8.62	1.99
Quality of Individual Wrestlers	8.80	1.97
Ticket Packages	6.95	2.88
Promotions	5.71	2.85

Note: The scale ranged from Extremely Poor (1) to Excellent (10)

Further, in a follow-up set of questions, fans were also asked to identify potential areas

for improvement in the NWCA All Star Classic event. In regard to maximizing interest in future wrestling events, fans suggested that “improved promotions” ($M = 4.12$; $SD = 1.55$) would have the largest influence on their decision to attend wrestling events in future years. Additionally, as shown in Table 3, a majority of the fans agreed that they would be more willing to support college wrestling events in the future if the proceeds went to saving programs that had previously been eliminated ($M = 4.04$; $SD = 1.66$).

Table 3 - *Descriptive Statistics for Wrestling Fan’s Suggestions for Improving All Star Classic Product*

Responses	Mean	Standard Deviation
All Star Classic Suggestions (N = 149)	3.49	1.68
Better Location	2.54	1.72
Change Event Date	3.33	1.81
Fan Voting System	3.51	1.82
Improved Promotions	4.12	1.55
Improved Ticket Packages	3.37	1.52
Proceeds to Eliminated Programs	4.04	1.66

Note: The scale ranged from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (6)

Discussion

The results of the study bring up several key findings that are worth discussing in the context of enhancing the sustainability of college wrestling at its member institutions. With the continual program eliminations facing wrestling programs at the intercollegiate level (The NCAA News, 2006), it is now more critical than ever for the NWCA to take steps to enhance the sustainability of college wrestling and its member institutions (Moyer, personal interview, January 26, 2009). From a broad perspective, the identification of consumer preferences in the research allows the NWCA and advocates of college wrestling to implement base-level promotional strategies to enhance interest in local dual meets and specialized “All Star” events in future years. Further, the findings allow for future development of studies focusing on marketing initiatives to be carried out by wrestling coaches at the local level.

When focusing on the overall motivational preferences, the results illustrated the primary reasons why fans chose to attend the wrestling event. Similar to previous studies on amateur wrestling (Cooper, in press), the data supported the notion that fans responded most favorably to the achievement and individual match-up aspects of the event. Thus, in direct contrast to past motivational preference research (James & Ridinger, 2002; Wann, 1995), the results illustrated that wrestling fans have certain set motivational preferences when attending different wrestling

events. Thus, these trends are significant because they allow the NWCA and advocates of college wrestling to create unified marketing plans for a variety of different wrestling events (e.g., All Star Classic, dual meets, and conference tournaments). For example, the NWCA could utilize technology to create an innovative website featuring the individual match-ups offered at different highlight wrestling events. Further, the NWCA could utilize their college wrestling database to increase interest in events throughout the season.

In addition to the previous motivational preferences, the results also demonstrated that a large majority of fans attended the event to support college wrestling (e.g., Wrestling Loyalist). In particular, many fans indicated that they chose to attend the wrestling event in an effort to help save college wrestling programs. While the result seems somewhat benign in nature, the trend is extremely important because it affords the NWCA the opportunity to implement “save college wrestling” campaigns to increase interest in the event in future years. More specifically, it allows the organization to utilize creative ticket packages with a dedication towards endowment funds when promoting the event in future years. Thus, the change in positioning is helpful in developing funds to save college wrestling programs all across the United States.

Building on the previous findings, the research also identified the varying motivational preferences of fans when focusing on their background information. While there were few motivational differences among fans when focusing on their affiliation, the data indicated that high school coaches and student-athletes were more attracted by the learning opportunities offered at the event than casual wrestling fans. In particular, this finding is critical because many wrestling programs have a difficult time attracting high school coaches and athletes to local dual meets. With this understanding, the NWCA and wrestling programs have a cost effective way to attract this market segment to dual meets and specialized events during the college wrestling season. Further, with innovative educational programs, the NWCA also has the opportunity to develop loyalty among high school coaches and wrestlers in future generations.

Similar to the findings by Cooper (in press), the results also illustrated the segmented responses among fans when focusing on their age. In general, the data supported the notion that older generations of fans were more attracted by the entertainment and team affiliation motives than younger generations of fans. This finding is important because it allows the NWCA and college wrestling programs to create segmented promotions when attempting to attract older generations of fans at future dual meets. For example, with a future emphasis on database marketing, older generations of fans can be attracted by highlighting the team element of wrestling competitions.

When focusing on the fans’ responses to the All Star Classic product being offered, the previous motivational preferences seem to align well with improving organizational efforts in future generations. Overall, the fans seemed to be least satisfied with the promotions offered by the NWCA, and suggested an improved effort in future years to enhance interest in the event. In addition to adjusting the date of the event, fans seemed to feel that “proceeds going to eliminated programs” would be a good cause to support in future years. With this being the case, publicity campaigns and marketing plans could be effectively directed towards saving the sport at future wrestling events. Further, each of the previous suggestions could be implemented to deliver a more well-rounded promotional campaign to consumers in upcoming years.

Conclusion

The NWCA has the daunting task of leading a task force to saving college wrestling at its member institutions in future generations. In order to enhance the sustainability of programs in future years, the NWCA must focus on working with the NCAA to create a product that is more consumer friendly to potential clientele. While a major portion of this objective deals with the enhancement of the core product being delivered, there must also be a strong emphasis on effectively marketing highlight events within the college wrestling schedule to maximize consumer interest in the sport. The current research attempted to provide a base understanding of fundamental strategies that can be implemented to attract more fans to the event in future years. Ultimately, this is a critical step for the NWCA and advocates of college wrestling as they move forward on their journey to save college wrestling.

One limitation of the research is that it focused solely on the motivational preferences of fans in attendance at their NWCA All Star Classic event. While this is highly useful information for gaining a base understanding of fan consumption habits, there should also be a study that examines the motivational preferences of fans that chose not to attend the event. This would be useful in determining if there are other strategies that the NWCA can utilize when attempting to maximize consumer interest in future college wrestling events. Further, additional studies should be carried out at wrestling events at the local, regional, and national levels to aide in the development of a universal marketing plan for college wrestling.

In addition to studies focusing on fan preferences, there is also a strong need for research that focuses on consumers' level of satisfaction with the current college wrestling being offered (e.g., rankings, rules, schedule). With an increasingly competitive sport industry (Drape & Evans, 2008), the identification of potential improvements in the product is essential when attempting to maximize consumer interest in college wrestling events. Furthermore, a more well-rounded approach could be achieved by surveying coaches, referees, and student-athletes on their opinion of several aspects of the current college wrestling product. Each of the previous suggestions is critical when positioning college wrestling to remain sustainable in future generations.

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Author Notes

¹ In an interview with the Executive Director of the NWCA, Mike Moyer indicated that the NWCA All Star Classic is strategically placed for a variety of different reasons. In recent years, the event was held on the University of Oregon and Southern Illinois – Edwardsville campuses to encourage positive publicity towards eliminated programs. Further, recent locations have been chosen to build the sport in “non-popular” wrestling geographical locations such as Texas.

² The learning opportunity was included as an influence for consumers interested in acquiring new wrestling strategies and techniques from attending the event.

³ The wrestling loyalist motive was included as a potential preference for individuals who attend wrestling events to help support college wrestling.