

Wubble Bubble

THE 2020 WNBA SEASON AND THE NEXT DECADE

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CAPSTONE PROJECT | M.S. IN GLOBAL SPORT

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Introduction

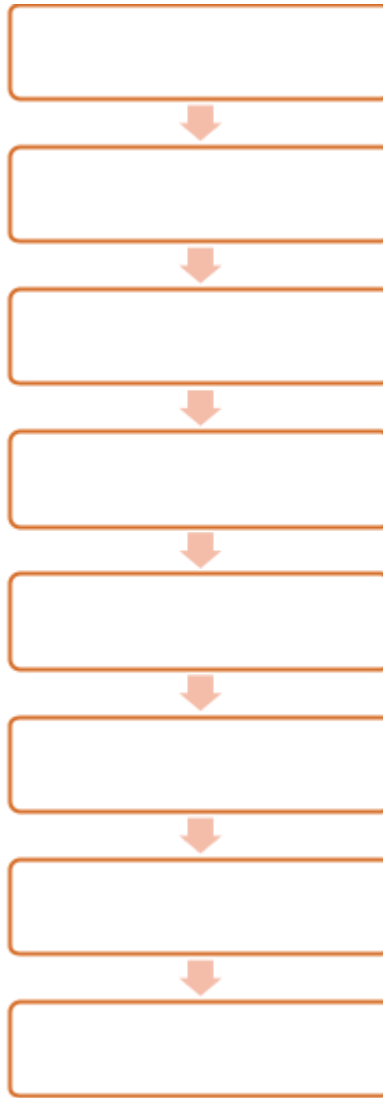
Because of the COVID-19 virus, 2020 was a year of upheaval and change. Few other industries were as impacted as sports. As the virus spread across the world, sports leagues were shut down which left millions of athletes, executives, and staff in limbo. Once it became evident that the virus was going to remain a fixture in people's lives for the foreseeable future, sports leagues decided to look for ways to continue to complete their seasons. One of the leagues that was able to successfully hold a season in 2020 was the WNBA. It was paramount for the league to have a season in 2020 to build on the momentum that had been generated in previous years. The season proved to be a success, and, in some cases, it was an introduction to the WNBA. For many people, this was the first time they could have seen WNBA games on national television, or it could have been the first time that their social media feeds were full of images of WNBA players doing things such as speaking out against racism and police violence. This project takes that into account and seeks to understand where the WNBA was at the end of the 2020 season and where it could go in the coming years. There is a particular focus on the marketing aspect of the league because it represents the best and most efficient way of growth.

Thesis Statement

In one of the most difficult years the sports world has ever faced, the WNBA and its players were able to execute a successful bubble season that further endeared them to current fans while simultaneously finding new ways to attract new viewers. To understand how they were able to do this, we need to go through and analyze the high points within the bubble, especially the response to social justice, while also taking a critical look at the missteps and potential lessons that can be applied to future seasons.

Background

With only 144 roster spots across 12 teams, the WNBA is one of the most competitive leagues in the world. It was founded in 1996 and has since served as the home for the best women's basketball players in the world since then (WNBA, n.d.). While the league's players have been able to grow the game of women's basketball and elevate the talent on the court, they have also played a major part in developing athletes' ability to use their platform for the proper causes off the field of play. The WNBA's growth into being the leader in athlete activism has been developed over the last four years, beginning with the response of four Minnesota Lynx players to the murders of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling. Maya Moore, Seimone Augustus, Rebekkah Brunson, and Lindsay Whalen were the leaders in the response as they openly discussed police brutality, systemic racism, and senseless violence in a press conference (Gibbs, The WNBA didn't follow in the NBA's footsteps. It blazed the trail., 2020). After their statement, that encouraged other players to step up as well, including one of the most famous women's basketball players in Sue Bird (See Appendix A). This was before Colin Kaepernick began kneeling and bringing even more attention to those same issues (Boren, 2020). Although the Lynx players did not receive the same attention, they were true trailblazers when it comes to the modern era of athlete activism. The players, in conjunction with the league, took things a step further in 2020 as they began the season in the middle of the largest racial reckoning the United States had gone through in decades. The WNBA's role in social justice is highlighted even more by the fact that the players are 80% Black women while also including individuals such as Layshia Clarendon, who is the first openly transgender and non-binary WNBA player (Barnes, 2021). Below is a timeline of events that occurred within the WNBA Wubble to provide additional context as to why the 2020 season was pivotal for the league.

Wubble Timeline**Literature Review****144**

The documentary “144” provides a behind-the-scenes look at the WNBA bubble with a special focus on the players. There are specific sections within the film that tackle topics such as the elections that took place in November, the life of players in the bubble, and their response to the shooting of Jacob Blake. The players are open about the struggles they are facing on a

day-to-day basis with regards to both playing a season of basketball in the middle of a pandemic and making sure that they also don't forget about their social justice initiatives. Two quotes from the documentary stand out regarding this topic. The first is from Natalie Achonwa where she says that it is a "Privilege to be in the bubble" because they can worry less about the virus given all the health and safety measures. The other is from Jewell Lloyd where she says that there is "Never an off day of being black" (Stowell & Contreras, 2021). This just goes to show the mental and emotional difficulty that the majority of the league was facing during the season where they were also worried about the safety of friends and family at a time where tensions surrounding race were extremely high.

Another notable part of the documentary is the way that the players came together to discuss their next steps after they decided to sit out the games directly after Jacob Blake was shot. The cameras captured the tense moments of discussion between the players as they debated on whether they were going to sit out more games or not. There were moments such as Sue Bird saying that the WNBA needs to "Start thinking ourselves as our own league" in response to another player asking whether they should follow what the NBA does next (Stowell & Contreras, 2021). There is also another perspective provided by Courtney Williams where she says that she came to the bubble to get paid and therefore would like to play the games to make sure that she can take care of her family back home. What this film highlights is the unity between the players. This level of behind-the-scenes access is rare in professional sports and the raw emotions that players displayed are one of the reasons why the WNBA has been able to cultivate a loyal fanbase. The authenticity is real and the film makes you want to cheer for every player and team. While the documentary provided an inside look at the Wubble and had the players give their perspective, it is important to get an outside view as well as understand how the WNBA has been

able to reach this point in their fight for social justice. That is what Lindsay Gibbs was able to do in her newsletter as she chronicled the events in the Wubble.

Power Plays

Lindsay Gibbs' article, "The WNBA didn't follow in the NBA's footsteps. It blazed the trail." from her Power Plays newsletter also provides an overview of what happened in the WNBA bubble but also includes insight from other figures such as Chicago Sky head coach, James Wade, one of two black coaches in the league (Gibbs, 2021). It chronicles the previous instances of social justice that WNBA players displayed, from the shirts that the Minnesota Lynx wore after the killing of both Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, to Maya Moore taking two seasons off to fight for criminal justice reform while also working on freeing Jonathan Irons, a man who was wrongfully convicted. This kind of information reinforces the fact that the WNBA is a trailblazing league when it comes to the fight for social justice. Credibility is a major factor in what makes the WNBA a league that everyone should be following and contributes to building the community aspect of the fanbase. Now that there is a better understanding of what went on inside the Wubble, it is time to look forward and analyze how the league can market itself moving forward.

The Fan Project

Moving to the business and fan engagement aspect of the bubble season, it is important to understand who the fans of women's sports are and what the future landscape looks like for investment opportunities. Sports Innovation Lab produced the Fan Project Report to address the two points and provided a "business model for how to invest in sports and win" (Sports Innovation Lab, 2021). The report highlighted the way that fans of women's sports are fluid fans, which means that they utilize technology to consume their favorite sport, care about social

change, and want to connect with the athletes they follow as much as possible. This highlights the ways that an organization can properly invest in women's sports and do it in a way that leads to a positive return. The report also details the organizations that have already invested in sports and got rewarded such as Nike, Visa, and Budweiser. Seeing these big brands invest in women's sports should encourage others to do the same. Lastly, Sports Innovation Lab recommends a proper business model that organizations can shift towards. This is the community-based model which means creating online content through multiple channels for fans to consume daily, having exclusive merchandise, and creating opportunities for fans to watch games together, either virtually or in person. This report looked at the WNBA from a business and marketing perspective. This last section of this literature review focuses on the media side of the WNBA and the necessary improvements that are needed on that front.

Loving Sports When They Don't Love You Back

The book "Loving Sports When They Don't Love You Back" covers many topics that modern fans have to think about such as cheering for your team that has a racist mascot or employs a player that is accused of domestic violence but the one that is most relevant to this paper is the chapter about "Watching Women's Basketball When People Tell You You're the Only One" (Luther & Davidson, 2020). In it, Jessica Luther and Kavitha Davidson go through the coverage issues that women's basketball and the WNBA have experienced, discuss how things are starting to improve and what could be done to bring even more attention to the sport. The main theme of the chapter revolves around utilizing media to bring more people to the game. And that makes sense, without media being available for current fans to consume, how could there be an expectation for the league to grow? The chapter is a useful examination of how much further women's basketball can go and some of the ways that can assist in that goal.

PEST Analysis

<u>Political</u>	<u>Economic</u>	<u>Social</u>	<u>Technological</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging fans to vote in the November elections. • Atlanta Dream and WNBA players endorsing Raphael Warnock (Gibbs, WNBA players (hopefully) save America , 2021). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wubble season guaranteed revenue. • Amazon bought rights for 16 regular-season games (Porter, 2021). • CBS Sports extended partnership. • Twitter will stream 12 games. • Facebook will stream 20 games (WNBA, 2021). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated 2020 season to Say Her Name and Breonna Taylor. • Players are majority black women (Stowell & Contreras, 2021). • Participation in women's sports is growing (Sports Innovation Lab, 2021). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WNBA League Pass. • Fans are used to watching games online. • Strong social media community. • Can watch games using an Oculus Quest (WNBA, 2021).

This analysis shows just how unique the WNBA is. Because it is a relatively young league, it can test itself and change to fit the current landscape. This is evident in embracing social justice causes and utilizing social media as powerful partners to assist in accessibility. The league recognizes who their fans are and what they would like to support and have adjusted accordingly. Working with Twitter, Facebook, and Amazon as they are getting their feet wet in the live sports landscape is a major advantage. This allows the WNBA to grow alongside those three platforms and it also appeals to a fanbase that is used to watching games through online streaming.

Marketing Plan

The marketing plan of the WNBA will be one of the most important aspects of determining the league's growth and success over the next few years. As shown in the PEST analysis above, the league has so much potential, but the key is to find ways to highlight the league's strengths and uniqueness. The marketing mix below seeks to provide some guidelines on how the WNBA can best harness that potential through the lens of the Four Ps: Price, Product, Place, and Promotion.

Price

For the Price, there likely isn't too much that should be addressed when it comes to the cost of watching a game either in person or online. Right now, the average cost of attending a WNBA game in person is \$47, which is an affordable price considering that a fan will be watching some of the best basketball players in the world (Bailum, 2021). Meanwhile, a whole season of WNBA league pass only costs \$16.99 and allows fans to watch up to four games at the same time (De La Cretaz, Living Nonbinary in a Binary Sports World, 2021). Overall, the WNBA doesn't need to adjust the price of either access point since they are already so affordable. The cost of games isn't too much of a factor when it comes to making the game more accessible to current and potential fans. That burden falls on the rest of the Ps which are covered below.

Product

The product of the WNBA is the games and players. Every year, 144 of the best players in the world come together and compete to win the WNBA Championship. There are only 12 teams in the league right now and that means that each roster is full of high-level talent. This creates games that showcase elite skill across the board and there are times where even good

players are cut or traded given the space constraints on rosters. There have also been recent calls to expand the league to address issues like this and that could be a smart decision to open more markets for teams. After the 2021 Wubble season, Commissioner Cathy Engelbert hinted at expansion so it could be coming soon (Hruby, 2021). Doing this would lead to more and better access for WNBA and women's sports fans around the country.

In addition to the excellence on the court, the WNBA also can be an industry leader when it comes to social justice issues. That has become a bigger and bigger part of the WNBA's product for the last couple of seasons as players have become more comfortable about utilizing their voice to make real-world changes. Being willing to speak out is a key part of what makes the WNBA attractive to "fluid fans" since they want to watch and support athletes who drive societal change (Sports Innovation Lab, 2021, p. 7). Moving forward, the WNBA has to embrace the unique personalities of players and allow them to continue to have the freedom to fight for the causes they believe in. Otherwise, they not only risk alienating players but also a large majority of fans.

Place

This section will focus on where the WNBA is currently available and the places where it should focus on improving access. Even if there are many reasons why WNBA fans should be pleased with the growth of the league from the last two years, there are still many developments that need to happen to get even more people interested in watching. The first improvement is to revamp WNBA League Pass to make it a better user experience. Even if the app went through a redesign for the 2021 season, there are still some key points that make it a difficult app to utilize such as different volumes between commercials and games and being able to only log in on one device at a time (De La Cretaz, The WNBA is more popular than ever, but watching the games

on League Pass is an absolute nightmare. 'It sucks being a fan', 2021). These are basic aspects of the app that should be fixed if the league is serious about growing the game. Due to accessibility issues, most women's sports fans are already used to using tech to watch games so the league should make it as good an experience as possible.

Along the same line, the league also needs to work on making it easier for fans to find games. It shouldn't be too hard to find games since time and time again, the WNBA and its fans have proven that it is a worthwhile investment for networks. During the 2020 season, the WNBA saw a 15% increase in viewership for the finals while the NBA saw a 49% decline (Ayala, 2021). ESPN and other networks should fight for the right to broadcast WNBA games since they will bring in a new and dedicated audience.

Promotion

And finally, this section will look into how the league should be promoting itself. The first thing the WNBA could do is to find more players to highlight and turn into stars. While Sue Bird, Diana Taurasi, and Sabrina Ionescu are unbelievable players who deserve all the praise and attention, the WNBA would benefit by bringing more attention to other players as well, particularly black players such as 2020 MVP A'ja Wilson, Napheesa Collier, and Arike Ogunbowale. Doing so would make people more interested to watch more teams and games instead of just watching the Seattle Storm and New York Liberty. The league is full of interesting people who have stories to share and reasons to cheer for them. It's just a matter of showcasing them to a wider audience. This means working with media companies such as Togethxr to create multimedia content across different platforms and promoting the various online publications that focus on women's sports such as The IX and Just Women's Sports.

The league could also create watch parties in the cities with WNBA teams to take advantage of the sense of community that fans have with each other. Creating and utilizing a large community of fans is something that the league could learn from both the MLS and NWSL. The teams in both of those soccer leagues have supporter groups that watch games together and can function as an effective way to bring new fans into the fold.

Key Performance Indicators

Players

<u>Goal</u>	<u>KPI</u>
1. Development of more marketable star players	More sponsorship and commercial deals for black players
2. Increased pay for players	The average WNBA salary is \$120,648 but the goal should be to have a higher average in the next CBA (Club, 2020)
3. Remain committed to social causes	Continued dedication of seasons to specific organizations such as Say Her Name

League

<u>Goal</u>	<u>KPI</u>
1. Investment from networks	ESPN doubles nationally televised games from 25 to 50 (Voepel, 2021)
2. Higher viewership numbers	Number of current average viewers is 357,000 and the goal should be to reach 500,000 average viewers
3. Ticket price increase	Increase average ticket price from \$47 to \$60 (Bailum, 2021)
4. Accessibility across multiple channels	Improve functionality of WNBA League Pass Double the number of League Pass users
5. League Expansion	Increase the number of teams from 12 to 16
6. Remaining top of mind during offseason	Have consistent engagement numbers on social media throughout the fall and winter

If the league successfully implements a compelling marketing plan, it should be able to meet most, if not all of the listed key performance indicators above. However, if there are a few key points that should be a top priority, they are the following: Development of more marketable star players and Investment from networks. These are the two KPIs that provide the foundation for the others to occur. If more top players receive good endorsement deals, that will lead to more eyes on the league and could give them a bigger platform for the causes they believe in. Similarly on the league side, if networks continue to invest in the league, that will almost guarantee higher viewership numbers and give the WNBA a better sense of where untapped markets are for new expansion teams.

Conclusion/Recommendations

It will be incredibly interesting to see where the WNBA goes as we get deeper into the decade. There are so many ways for the league to grow that it may be difficult to figure out which ones are the most important. The following are three different recommendations for the WNBA to focus on. These are recommendations that could lead to meeting the KPIs that are listed in the previous section.

League Expansion

Expansion is always a good sign of a healthy sports league. There is already too much talent for the number of roster spots available. There are also a few rather obvious markets for the WNBA to tap into such as the San Francisco Bay Area and Portland. Lastly, it may also be easier to attract new owners given what the NWSL has been able to do. They have been able to attract superstar owners such as Serena Williams and Mia Hamm for Angel City FC (Creditor,

2020). Bringing in big-name investors could be one strategy to assist in building some buzz and excitement around expansion.

Revamped Marketing Plan

While the WNBA has already shown that it understands its fans and can successfully market to them, there are still a few key points that would elevate the league's marketing even more. One key point would be to truly foster the community aspect of WNBA fans. That means having more league-sponsored community events or watch parties. These events would open many marketing opportunities and could entice more sponsors to get involved. Another key point would be to create digital content to showcase the personalities of players. This would take advantage of the fact that many WNBA fans use social media daily and could introduce more players to a wider and younger audience.

Accessibility for Games

This last recommendation is more about making it easier to watch WNBA games. It involves continuing to partner with platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Amazon, investing in WNBA League Pass, and working alongside traditional networks such as ESPN and CBS. While the league is already doing many of these things, there is still potential to be captured. It may also open an opportunity for the league to begin a bidding war among platforms and networks to become the exclusive media rights partner for the WNBA. That would lead to a large contract and could set the standard not only for women's basketball but all women's sports across the world.

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Appendix A



Appendix B

