A Comparative Analysis of Sponsorship Objectives for U.S. Women's Sport and Traditional Sport Sponsorship

Nancy L. Lough and Richard L. Irwin

Abstract

Increasingly, corporations are relying on the merits of sport sponsorship to market their companies' products and services (Howard & Crompton, 1995). In fact, North American companies increased sponsorship spending in 1998 by 15%, to $5.4 billion (Sponsorship Report, 1998). The emerging role of women in North American sport undoubtedly has been a significant catalyst for this growth trend in sport sponsorship. The number of female sport participants, as well as the number of female spectators, has escalated at a phenomenal pace, warranting attention from corporate America. Perhaps one of the most convincing issues influencing corporate sponsors to consider involvement with women's sport has been the increased recognition of women's strength in the U.S. marketplace and their expanded decision-making power (Lough, 1996). In 1993, Mechem estimated that by the year 2000, 61% of American women would be active in the work force. As increasing numbers of women have discretionary income to spend, and as the number of American women in decision-making roles has increased, corporate sponsors have become more and more interested in this previously neglected market segment. The competitive nature of today's marketplace makes the sponsorship of women's sport a viable avenue for tapping into this desirable market segment. With escalating rights fees and marketplace clutter, corporate rationale for sport sponsorship selection has been altered significantly. Irwin and Sutton (1994) found that results-oriented marketing motives appear to have replaced the philanthropic/image-building philosophy of the past. While such marketplace developments would appear to present opportunities for the funding of U.S. women's sport sponsorship proposals, no empirical evidence has been generated to support this. Two primary questions remain unanswered in the sport sponsorship environment: (a) will sponsorship of American women's sport resemble "traditional" sport sponsorship, with selection decisions based on specific criteria, and (b) will emergence within the contemporary sport sponsorship realm necessitate an objective-driven market orientation? The specific objectives for this study included: (a) determination of the dominant factors utilized (e.g., motives, objectives, proposal components) by current sponsors of U.S. women's sport in sponsorship selection decisions involving, first, sponsorship proposals from women's sport entities and, second, sponsorship proposals from mainstream sport entities; (b) assessment of the

While such marketplace developments would appear to present opportunities for funding U.S. women's sport sponsorship proposals, no empirical evidence has been generated to support this case. What remains unknown within the sport sponsorship environment are two primary questions: 1) Will sponsorship of American women's sport resemble "traditional" sport sponsorship, with selection decisions based on specific criteria, and 2) Will emergence within the contemporary sport sponsorship realm necessitate an objective-driven market orientation?

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relative importance of each set of factors; and (c) comparative analysis of the two sets of factors. This study utilized survey research methodology incorporating a modification of the Sport Sponsorship Proposal Evaluation Model (Irwin, Assimakopoulos, & Sutton, 1994; Lough, 1996). The results indicate that sponsors of U.S. women's sport desire measurable outcomes, such as increased market share and sales. The comparative analysis found that limited differences exist between general sport sponsorship objectives and women's sport sponsorship objectives. These findings suggest that in order to appeal most to corporate sponsors, those seeking such sponsors for women's sport properties should concentrate on providing business-building opportunities.

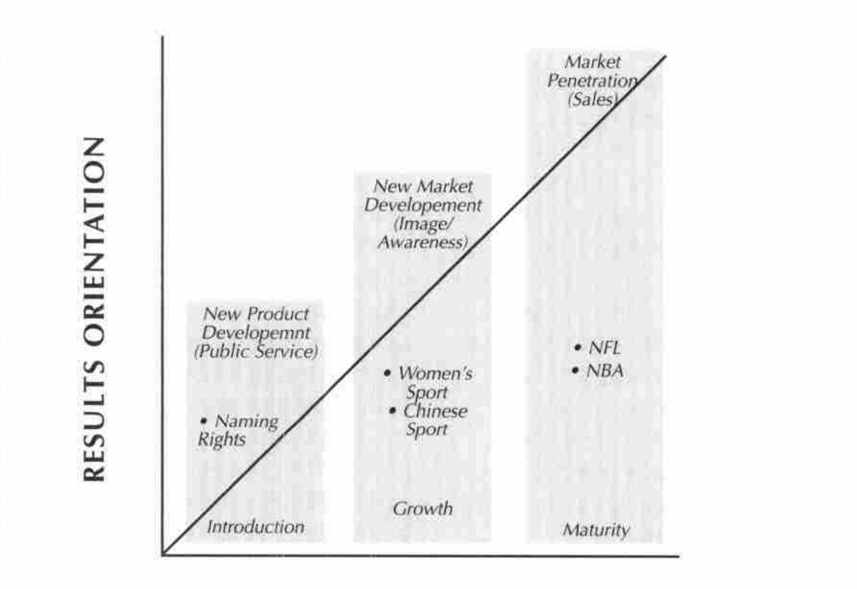
Corporate spending on sport sponsorship has increased dramatically within the past decade, reaching almost $19 billion worldwide. Within this same period of time, corporate spending for American women's sport sponsorship has surged more than 100%, from approximately $285 million in 1992 to $600 million in 1998 (IEG Sponsorship Report, 1998). A number of factors appear to have triggered the sudden rise in corporate spending.

The specific objectives for this study included: (a) determination of the dominant factors utilized (e.g., motives, objectives, proposal components) by current sponsors of U.S. women's sport in sponsorship selection decisions involving, first, sponsorship proposals from women's sport entities and, second, sponsorship proposals from mainstream sport entities; (b) assessment of the relative importance of each set of factors; and (c) comparative analysis of the two sets of factors.

First, women's sport has realized remarkable growth. For instance, 55 million women regularly participate in sport in the United States. Further, reports indicate that 55% of all volleyball players, 43% of all runners, and 41% of all soccer players are women (U.S. Industry & Trade Outlook, 1999). At present, over 31 million girls play team sports, and 39% of high school girls play varsity sports. This marks a significant increase, as previous accounts reported that in 1970 one in 27 girls played varsity sports, as compared to 1 in 3 in 1996 (National Federation of State High School Associations, 1997). The number of women participating in intercollegiate sport also has continued to increase, with over 110,000 American women active in 1997 (Women's Sports & Fitness, 1998). It is anticipated that increased participation will lead to increased consumer interest. As such, female competitors are more likely to become consumers of women's sport. Further support for this notion was found in 1996, when 85% of U.S. women surveyed reported that they were sports fans. This figure was up from 79% as reported in 1994 (Lopiano, 1999). As *Forbes* magazine noted in 1997, "The market research is clear: women are the next great business opportunity" (p. 130).

In 1997, the IEG Sponsorship Report indicated that $600 million was spent on the sponsorship of women's sport in the United States. This was a significant gain for this newly recognized sport product category, compared to the $285 million spent on such sponsorship in 1992 (IEG Sponsorship Report, 1998). One explanation for a portion of the gain is the creation of new women's sport properties, such as the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) and the Women's Professional Softball League (WPSL). Additionally, as companies investing in sport through sponsorship are intent on seeing a return on their investments (Irwin & Morris, 1996), it would appear that such a dramatic increase in sponsorship spending is a direct result of the apparent value derived from association with the women's sport product.

SPONSORSHIP PRODUCT GROWTH LIFECYCLE



The relationship between the sport product and the sport sponsor is multifaceted. For example, the lifespan of the sport product establishes a level of risk for potential sponsors. Whereas major U.S. professional sports, such as the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), or the National Basketball Association (NBA), are considered to be mature, familiar commodities to both consumers and sponsors, the fledgling Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) has a considerably less mature, more unfamiliar status. In more established professional women's sports, such as the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) and the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), the women's product still may be considered less mature simply because of the exposure, media coverage, and sponsorship spending that have been provided for its more established, male-sport counterparts, such as the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) and the Professional Golf Association (PGA). Increasing levels of sponsorship are vital to the growth of any sport property; this is especially true when considering newly recognized sport properties like women's sport properties.

A repeated pairing of the sponsor and the event should facilitate perceived association of the sponsor and event. Through the use of associative learning theory within the context of sport sponsorship, Till and Shimp (1998) found that, in fact, sponsors and the sponsored event do become linked over time. In American women's sport, one of the strongest associations that remained long after the sponsorship relationship ended was the association of Virginia Slims(cigarettes with women's tennis, or the WTA. Without the Virginia Slims™ sponsorship, the WTA may not have been able to achieve the level of recognition and autonomy it was able to achieve as a separate women's sport organization.

The link between the WTA and Virginia Slims™ in the 1970s was an exemplary use of sport sponsorship. The newly established WTA put forth an image of "women doing it for themselves"—going against the mainstream culture, which wanted to control women's tennis. Virginia Slims™ was marketing its cigarette brand for women and found the association with the WTA to be powerful; however, the mixed message implicit in a tobacco-product company sponsoring a professional sport tour that considered its athletes to be role models for health and fitness created controversy with the WTA membership. Additionally, the court ruling in *U.S. Federal Trade Commission v. Pinkerton Tobacco Company* (1991) ended virtually all tobacco-related sport sponsorships (Stotlar, 1993).

Another important facet of the sport sponsorship relationship is the size of the potential market, meaning the likelihood that a significant consumer base exists that will associate the sponsor's message with the sport event or organization and, conversely, will associate the sport property with the sponsor's image or products. Sponsorship has been found to affect consumer attitudes through the sponsor's message, the type of products/brands, and the event or organization with whom the sponsor is associated (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998). Thus, for those seeking corporate sponsorship for a sport product, an initial step is to provide sufficient data relative to the size and strength of the consumer base or target market that will be reached through that sponsorship relationship.

The IMG/WTA relationship is a recent example of how the U.S. women's sport market is expanding and how related sponsorship spending is growing. When IMG (International Management Group) sought a new title sponsor for the WTA tour, the goal was to secure $8 million, the largest sponsorship ever in women's sports. With television ratings that have surpassed the comparable men's tour ratings, and with recognizable young stars such as Venus and Serena Williams appealing to a more diverse audience, the WTA was able to sign Sara Lee's Sanex™ to a 5-year deal (Kaplan, 1999). However, a key aspect of the deal that truly marks a new era in women's sport sponsorship is the contractual obligation Sanex™ has wherein it agrees to spend at least another $40 million on promotion and advertising to raise awareness of their sponsorship and the WTA tour. This unprecedented obligation will require efforts toward leveraging the sponsorship relationships that have been evident, even expected, in more general sport sponsorship deals, yet have been lacking thus far in women's sport sponsorship.

With the increase of U.S. girls and women competing in sport and becoming spectators or fans, the question most sponsors still have is whether an investment in women's sport through sponsorship will in fact translate to meeting sponsorship objectives such as increased exposure, recognition, product sales, and brand loyalty.

Spectator exposure to the sponsor's name and logo has been attributed to product awareness and, according to Turco (1994), "may lead to product consumption" (p. 34). Development of awareness, enhancement of image, increased exposure, brand recognition, product sales, and brand loyalty have been found to be primary sponsorship objectives for companies involved with sport (Irwin & Sutton, 1994). Thus, a developing sport product must provide evidence that associating with it will establish a competitive advantage that meets the established objectives of the sponsor(s).

Arguably, the days of philanthropic sponsorship have passed—even in the newly evolving world of women's sport. Today, the primary objective for sponsors involved in sport is a positive return on their investment (Irwin & Morris, 1996). With the increase in U.S. girls and women competing in sport and becoming spectators or fans, the question most sponsors still have is whether an investment in women's sport through sponsorship will in fact translate to the attainment of sponsorship objectives such as increased exposure, recognition, product sales, and brand loyalty.

Value of U.S. Women's Sport Market

Traditionally, sponsorship of sport was thought to be the best way to reach male consumers. With $7.6 billion estimated for sponsorship spending in 1999 (IEG Sponsorship Report, 1998), it seems evident that this tactic has been effective. Consequently, women were not considered as targets of sport sponsorship for the following reasons: (a) women were not considered to be knowledgeable about sport, (b) women were not considered to be serious sports fans, and, most importantly, (c) women were not thought to possess significant discretionary income. Estimates show, however, that female-worker income in the U.S. equals $1 trillion annually (*Forbes,* 1997). Just as women gradually have learned to be athletes and sports fans, they also have climbed the employment ladder to substantially more respectable levels. As a group, women have substantial purchasing power, controlling about 60% of U.S. wealth. Women also are responsible for more than 80% of all purchases (U.S. Industry & Trade Outlook, 1999). Therefore, they would appear to be of vast interest to marketers and sport sponsors.

Support for the notion that women have a substantial economic impact on the sport market also resides in the latest finding that in 33% of dual-income families, the woman earns the higher income (Sporting Goods Dealer, 1995). As evidence that women are spending discretionary income on sport-related purchases, consider that $6 billion was spent on women's athletic footwear in the U.S. in 1995. This figure overlapped comparable men's expenditures of $5.6 billion (Wallenchinsky, 1996). Additionally, women buy out of proportion to their levels of participation. For example, in the U.S., only 20% of all golfers are women, yet women buy 50% of all golf products, with the exception of golf clubs (Lopiano, 1999). With buying power increasing, more women in decision-making roles for the household, and more women experienced in sport on some level, the sport industry is beginning to recognize the economic impact from this segment.

Another aspect of women's sport that would appear to be attractive to sponsors is the fact that this market is also undersaturated, as opposed to the alternative options found in the top-tier U.S. sports (Lough, 1996). For sponsors, saturation translates into money spent on a lost message. Involvement with an undersaturated market could translate into an immediate impact by the sport sponsor on the chosen market, due to greater exposure, recognition, and product/image awareness. For women's sport, this is true due to less advertising "clutter" or "noise" surrounding the sport property. Television exposure is the vehicle most often preferred by corporate sponsors and sport marketers. Once again, the numbers representing U.S. women who watch sport are impressive, and the numbers representing those who watch women's sport are equally so. Women aged 18–34 years increased their viewership of the Olympic Games during the period between 1992 and 1996. The latest estimate indicates that 55–65% of Atlanta's 1996 Olympic audience was female. In 1999, the Women's World Cup was the most-watched soccer tournament or event in the history of network television, with an estimated 40 million U.S. viewers. The turnout of 90,185 at the Rose Bowl also was the largest ever for a women's sporting event (Wahl, 1999). Furthermore, women have been reported to comprise 45% of the NFL and MLB television audience, and the NBA estimates that at least 40% of its television audience is made up of women (Grossi, 1993; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2000). These figures have not been ignored by the top-tier sports; in fact, every major professional league has a marketing strategy targeting women. Front-runners in the U.S. sport marketing industry, such as NFL Properties, have even developed merchandise lines specifically for women.

Ironically, the majority of sponsorship dollars are spent trying to appeal to men, who are not typically responsible for product purchases in the U.S. Product sales are carried out predominantly by female consumers. Thus, corporate sponsors that target seeking a return on their investments through product sales should focus their efforts toward gaining recognition and exposure with American women consumers. Utilizing affiliations with women's sport appears to be an effective approach for reaching women consumers.

The aforementioned figures seem to suggest that U.S. women's sport offers sponsors an opportunity to affiliate with new brands to reach the untapped audience of women's sport. Ironically, the majority of sponsorship dollars are spent in an attempt to appeal to men, who typically are not responsible for product purchases in the United States. Product sales are carried out predominantly by female consumers. Thus, corporate sponsors who target seeking a return on their investments through product sales should focus their efforts toward gaining recognition and exposure among American women consumers. Utilizing affiliations with women's sport appears to be an effective approach toward reaching women consumers.

Increasingly, sponsors and sport marketers are looking to female athletes to appeal to consumers, especially female consumers. In general, female athletes are perceived as being appreciative, hardworking, and less of an image risk than are many of the high-profile male athletes. An athlete's poor behavior and the resulting negative publicity can damage the image of any company with whom that athlete is associated. Therefore, the opportunity for women athletes to establish positive images in the consciousness of American sport consumers exists more now than ever before.

Just as the 1984 Olympic Games have been recognized as the catalyst for sport sponsorship in general, it appears that the benchmark for women's sport sponsorship was the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. Evidence for this benchmark can be found in the increasing levels of prize money available in established women's sport properties, as well as in the increasing number of sponsors reporting involvement with women's sport after the 1996 Olympic Games. New women's sport properties such as the WNBA, which started in 1997, evolved directly as a result of fan interest supported by the 1996 Olympic Games television ratings.

Identifying Growth Patterns of Women's Sport Sponsorship

In 1995, the total number of women's sports sponsors as indicated by the *Sports Marketplace 1994* was 138. By 1997, after only 3 years, that number had increased by over 10%. With new women's sport properties such as the Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA), launched in April 2001, it is reasonable to speculate that the number of sponsors directly involved with women's sport will continue to increase as opportunities increase (Associated Press, 2000). Also, greater media exposure for women's sport properties has been warranted following the interest generated by the 1996 Olympic Games and the 1999 Women's World Cup (soccer). Combined, these factors suggest that the growth of women's sport sponsorship will continue; however, the number of sponsors for women's sport products has grown increasingly difficult to determine, as corporate sponsors have combined marketing efforts to include women's sport in their overall marketing mixes.

In 1996, Lough reported that 83% of companies responding indicated that the percentage of their budget allocated for advertising and promotions attributed to women's sport was 25% or less. Only 17% indicated that 50% or less of their budget was tagged for women's sport, and no companies reported commitments above 50%. In a similar study conducted in 1999, 39% of the companies reported spending less than 50% of their sponsorship budget on women's sport sponsorship, while 17% of the companies reported spending more than half of their sponsorship budget on women's sport (44% declined to respond based on company policy) (Lough & Irwin, 1999). The change in percentages during the period between the studies confirms an increased corporate commitment to women's sport.

When reviewing proposals not specifically related to women's sport, corporate sport sponsorship decision-makers appear to be most interested in opportunities that will ultimately yield sales and influence brand market share. However, when entertaining proposals specifically associated with women's sport, this same group of marketing executives appears to be more concerned with capitalizing on the image associated with the sponsorship and increasing the awareness of the sport property's target audience. In fact, 78% of the respondents assigned a high rating (six or seven) to *Increasing Target Market Awareness* when applied to a sponsorship of women's sport.

Significant increases in tour prize money available for women's professional tennis and for the LPGA also point to growth in sponsorship spending. Typically, tournament or tour sponsors are responsible for prize money. In professional women's tennis, nearly $40 million was available in 1997 on the WTA tour—over twice the amount available only 10 years prior. In professional women's golf, tour prize money escalated to over $30 million by 1997, which was over double the amount available in 1987 (Women's Sports Foundation, 1999). Just as the 1984 Olympic Games have been recognized as the catalyst for sport sponsorship in general, it appears that the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta were the benchmark for women's sport sponsorship. Evidence of this can be found in the increasing amounts of prize money available in established women's sport properties, as well as in the greater number of sponsors reporting involvement with women's sport after the 1996 Olympic Games. New women's sport properties such as the WNBA, which started in 1997, evolved as a direct result of fan interest supported by the television ratings for the 1996 Olympic Games.

The purpose of this study was to determine (a) whether sponsorship of U.S. women's sport will resemble "traditional" sport sponsorship, with selection decisions based on specific criteria, and (b) whether existing within the contemporary sport sponsorship realm will necessitate an objective-driven market orientation. As stated previously, companies investing in sport through sponsorship are intent on seeing a return on their investments. By providing evidence that association with a U.S. women's sport product will establish a competitive advantage and will therefore meet the established objectives of the sponsor(s), it is expected that women's sport will exemplify a similar pattern to that recently established by the "traditional" sport properties sponsorship.

Methodology

A derivative of the questionnaire used by Irwin, Assimakopoulos, and Sutton (1994) was developed employing a 7-point Likert scale to ascertain the importance of each sport sponsorship objective identified in the literature. To be included in the sample, a corporation must have been identified as an active sponsor of (a) one or more sport properties whose contestants are/were comprised exclusively of female athletes (e.g., WNBA) and (b) one or more other sport properties whose contestants are/were not comprised exclusively of female athletes. Survey instruments were forwarded to 74 randomly selected individuals identified within *Sports Marketplace* (1997) as being the key sport sponsorship decision makers at the companies fitting the aforementioned sample profile. All data were reported using descriptive statistics. Furthermore, all sport sponsorship objectives under investigation were categorized according to the sponsorship-objective dimensions established by Lough, Irwin, and Short (2000). Each subsequent dimension was subjected to paired (general sponsorship v. women's sport sponsorship) sample *t* tests (Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test). According to Fink (1995), a paired design is most appropriate when attempting to detect the difference between means obtained from the sample group. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, the significance level was set at $p < .10$. Repeated mailings followed by personal contact yielded usable responses from 16 corporate sport sponsorship decision makers, for a response rate of 21%. The Cronbach alpha, used to assess the internal consistency of the instrument, was found to be .94, indicating a high degree of response uniformity among respondents.

Table 1.
Importance of Corporate Sport Sponsorship Objective by Sport Sponsorship Type

Mean ratings (1 – 7) Objective	General	Women's
Increase sales/market share	5.94	5.72
Increase target market awareness	5.88	5.89
Enhance general company image	5.81	5.94
Increase public awareness of company	5.56	5.53
Demonstrate community involvement	4.75	4.88
Build trade relations	4.50	4.29
Build trade goodwill	4.31	4.24
Demonstrate social responsibility	4.19	4.57
Block/preempt the competition	4.19	4.00
Enhance employee relations	3.76	3.78
Demonstrate corporate philanthropy	3.13	3.71

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the relative importance of all sport sponsorship objectives under investigation. Responses

[F]urther analysis revealed that the sponsorship objectives assigned to the dimension tabbed "public service" were of least importance to all respondents when considering either type of sport sponsorship under investigation. However, a statistically significant difference was found to exist with respect to this specific set of objectives when respondents were considering a general sport sponsorship as compared to a sponsorship involving female athletes. Hence, this set of items may be considered of more importance to marketing decision makers when contemplating sponsorship opportunities specifically targeting women's sport.

Table 2.
Importance of Corporate Sport Sponsorship Objective Dimensions by Sport Sponsorship Type

	Mean ratings		Standard deviation		
Dimension	General	Women's	General	Women's	*p* value
Position enhancement	5.45	5.26	1.02	1.32	.40
Status enhancement	5.02	5.16	1.42	1.44	.89
Trade networking	4.40	4.13	2.15	2.08	.26
Public service	3.81	4.04	1.78	1.77	.08

were found to vary somewhat with respect to the sponsorship type. For instance, when reviewing proposals not specifically related to women's sport, corporate sport sponsorship decision makers appear to be most interested in opportunities that ultimately will yield sales and will influence brand market share. However, when entertaining proposals specifically associated with women's sport, this same group of marketing executives appears to be more concerned with capitalizing on the image associated with the sponsorship and with increasing the awareness of the sport property's target audience. In fact, 78% of the respondents assigned a high rating (6 or 7) to "increasing target market awareness" when applied to a sponsorship of women's sport. As an example, the Likert scale utilized ranged from 1 (extremely unimportant) to 7 (extremely important). On the other hand, "increasing sales/market share" was rated as extremely important by 71% of the respondents when applied to general sponsorship arrangements not specifically tailored to women's sport.

For data reduction and analytical purposes, the results were collapsed into the four dimensions of corporate sport sponsorship objectives established by Irwin and Sutton (1994), with existing differences analyzed by way of paired sample *t* tests. The results of this process, as well as the 2-tail level of significance for each, are revealed in Table 2. While the general ranking or position of each dimension was consistent across sponsorship type and was similar to Irwin and Sutton's earlier (1994) findings, the relative differences found between and within dimensions are noteworthy. For instance, further analysis revealed that the sponsorship objectives assigned to the dimension tabbed "public service" were of least importance to all respondents when considering either type of sport sponsorship under investigation. However, a statistically significant difference was found to exist with respect to this specific set of objectives when respondents were considering a general sport sponsorship as compared to a sponsorship involving female athletes. Hence, this set of items may be considered of more importance to marketing decision makers when contemplating sponsorship opportunities specifically targeting women's sport.

An intrasponsorship-type analysis (Table 2) revealed a statistically significant difference to exist for the importance of items classified as "position enhancement" and the

Table 3.
Frequency Distribution of Ratings Assigned to Sport Sponsorship Objective Dimensions

Dimension	Extremely unimportant 1	2	3	4	5	6	Extremely important 7
Position enhancement							
General	0.0	0.0	6.3	12.6	37.6	30.1	12.5
Women's	0.0	5.9	5.9	5.9	35.7	28.7	17.6
Status enhancement							
General	0.0	6.3	6.3	6.3	43.4	12.6	25.1
Women's	0.0	11.8	0.0	0.0	29.4	41.2	17.7
Trade networking							
General	18.8	6.3	0.0	18.8	18.8	18.8	18.8
Women's	17.6	5.9	0.0	35.3	11.8	5.9	23.5
Public service							
General	6.3	18.8	25.1	12.6	18.8	6.3	12.5
Women's	5.9	17.7	11.8	17.7	35.4	0.0	11.8

dimensions of "trade networking" and "public service," whether respondents were considering a general or a women's sport sponsorship ($p<.10$). This finding highlights the importance marketers place on finding sponsorships that enable them to attain this set of result-oriented outcomes. Similarly, the ratings provided for items comprising the dimension of "public service" were found to differ significantly from the dimensions of "position enhancement" and "status enhancement" for both sponsorship types under investigation ($p<.10$), thereby illustrating the limited emphasis directed toward the attempt to use sport sponsorship as a vehicle for fulfilling these potential marketing outputs.

Additionally, as revealed in Table 3, a majority (59%) of the averaged responses for items included in the "status enhancement" dimension were rated at a high level of importance (6 or 7) when respondents were asked to apply the motives under investigation to sponsorship programs specifically involving women's sport. No other dimension (i.e., classification of sponsorship objectives) under investigation received a similar proportion of high ratings. To put this into perspective, fewer than half of all respondents rated items contained within "position enhancement"—the overall most important set (dimension) of sponsorship objectives—as being extremely important for either general or women's sport sponsorship (see Table 3).

Discussion

The findings from this investigation mirror the results of investigations conducted within the past few years (Irwin & Sutton, 1994; Stotlar, 1999). This supports the notion that sponsorship, as a promotional vehicle, is viewed by the corporate community primarily as a means of strategically enhancing the company's market position. It would be somewhat redundant to elaborate on the need for sponsor seekers to engineer customized sponsorship packages that incorporate tactical elements (e.g., product sampling, corporate hospitality, point-of-purchase displays) that address objectives contributing to this prioritized outcome. More importantly, the results suggest that distinguishing demographic-type characteristics of the actual sponsorship product, such as sex and age, may in fact influence the prioritization of benefits as well as the outcomes sought by the sport property's corporate benefactors.

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Sex-Based Differences. The data generated from this study shed light on the possibility that *sponsorship type* does influence the anticipated outcome(s) and in turn influences the strategic application of the sponsorship arrangement. For instance, while sponsorship objectives comprising the "public service" dimension were found to be of least importance to decision. maker's these issues were of significantly greater importance to corporate decision makers with respect to consideration of women's sport sponsorship opportunities. However, of greatest importance may be the fact that sponsorship decision makers appear to be most interested in *enhancing the company image* through the women's sport sponsorship agreement. Such image enhancement can be achieved in a variety of ways. A sponsor endeavoring to distinguish itself on a local, regional, national, or multinational basis would likely seek a sport opportunity that would convey that image (e.g., high school sports, collegiate athletic programs, major professional sport leagues, and Olympics, respectively). In each case the sponsor is able to project a geographical image via the sport sponsorship's geographical magnitude. However, all sport teams, leagues, governing bodies, facilities, events, and even athletes project unique images of value to the corporate sponsor. It may in fact be argued that the image portrayed through the sponsorship of women's sport is one of social responsibility,

It may in fact be argued that the image portrayed through the sponsorship of women's sport is one of social responsibility, thus linking these independent objectives and their respective dimensions together and thereby maximizing a sponsorship's appeal to the corporate community. From a tactical perspective, it would appear that general sport sponsorships (involving male-only or combined-gender sports) more than likely would link sales promotion and corporate hospitality, whereas sponsors of women's sport would be more inclined to develop supplemental advertising conveying a specific message to be projected to a specific audience.

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Age-Based Differences. The data generated in this investigation also may provide evidence that the age or maturity of the sponsorship arrangement influences the sponsor's anticipated marketing results. The findings associated with women's sport sponsorship (i.e., importance of image-related items) mirror those generated in early studies conducted in the field of sponsorship (Kuzma, Shanklin, & McCalley, 1993). It can be argued that this previous research was conducted at a period in time when, as a product available for consumption by corporate America, the relatively youthful field of sport sponsorship (1984 is typically acknowledged as the birth of American sport sponsorship as it is known today) was transitioning through a series of life stages or was maturing in a fashion similar to that of other products. The current research appears to indicate that as a sponsorship matures, the sponsor's motives become less image oriented and more results oriented.

A Proposed Sponsorship-Product Life Cycle. Using a typical product life cycle found in any marketing textbook (see Figure 1), the relative position of each "product" under investigation was plotted. According to Czinkota, Kotabe, and Mercer (1997), during the growth stage, as customers become aware of the product and its benefits, usage escalates—whereas during the maturity stage, sales may continue to grow, albeit more slowly. This textbook definition clearly distinguishes U.S. women's sport sponsorship from general sport sponsorship as sales (overall expenditures as well as corporate budgetary allocations) are still in a state of rapid growth. In fact, it would appear that the recent emergence of women's sport sponsorship accounts for a valuable proportion of the overall sponsorship "sales" increases realized over the past few years (see Table 4).

As revealed in Table 4, the expansive growth in sponsorship spending— approximately 20% per year—has slowed considerably within the past few years. Also, the market expansion experienced for traditional sport properties during the late 1980s and early 1990s has permeated the boundaries of the U.S., perhaps indicating a maturation of the general U.S. sport sponsorship product market. Subsequent research conducted during this "maturation" stage has revealed that results-driven objectives have emerged as being most important to corporate marketing decision makers. Moreover, within the sponsorship product category, a "new" line has been introduced specifically targeting women's sport. It is hypothesized that this has triggered a retrospective view of anticipated outcomes focusing on image and awareness building and on a public-service orientation. The sponsorship product's newness may play a role in influencing the inclinations of corporate decision makers to delay expectations of quantifiable outcomes until the product has had sufficient time to sustain market affiliation.

Sponsorship of an "immature" product also may result from the social networks described by Berrett and Slack (1999). In such a case the corporation's decision to sponsor often is guided by personal relations or interests rather than by business-building rationale. It can be hypothesized that the motives of decision makers willing to aid the launch of a new sponsorship product (e.g., women's sport) are likely to be both results driven and service/image driven. Further research is needed to examine the service/image dimension of women's sport sponsorship as it relates to "cause-related" marketing.

Table 4.
Sponsorship Growth in North America Since 1985

Year	Number of corporate sponsors	Amount spent
1998	5,200	$6.80 billion
1997	5,000	$5.90 billion
1996	4,900	$5.40 billion
1995	4,800	$4.70 billion
1994	4,600	$4.25 billion
1993	4,500	$3.70 billion
1992	4,300	$3.20 billion
1991	4,200	$2.80 billion
1990	4,000	$2.50 billion
1989	3,850	$2.10 billion
1988	3,700	$1.75 billion
1987	3,400	$1.35 billion
1986	2,100	$1.00 billion
1985	1,600	$850 million

Summary

The results indicate that sponsors of U.S. women's sport desire measurable outcomes such as increased market share and sales, along with enhanced image and market awareness. Overall, the comparative analysis found only limited differences between general sport sponsorship objectives and women's sport sponsorship objectives. For example, corporations supporting female sports tend to pursue sponsorship opportunities in an effort to achieve enhanced image and awareness within a targeted market, whereas those sponsoring other events tend to place more importance on capturing sales and market share. However, the participating athlete's sex may not be the only demographic characteristic influencing the prospective sponsor's motives. The results from this analysis shed light on the influence of a sponsorship's age. It would appear that the more mature sport sponsorships, generally involving male or co-ed sporting events, yield higher quantifiable results orientation, whereas less mature sponsorship opportunities typically render a combination of quantifiable expectations and qualitative expectations. While industry-wide figures were used in the analysis to demonstrate this point, future research must focus on defining a mature sponsorship product. As with any product, specific sponsorship factors, such as chronological age and cost, must be assessed. As securing corporate sponsorship for sport grows increasingly competitive, acknowledging differences based on gender and age of sport properties may be one strategy for enhancing existing relationships or improving the acquisition of new partnerships. These findings suggest that those seeking sponsors for women's sport properties should concentrate on providing business-building and image-enhancing opportunities in order to appeal most to corporate sponsors.

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