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Comparing National Football League Teams' Marketing Strategies: Case Studies on the Pittsburgh Steelers, the Green Bay Packers, and the Carolina Panthers

Isabella Cowen

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Comparing National Football League Teams' Marketing Strategies: Case Studies on the Pittsburgh Steelers, the Green Bay Packers, and the Carolina Panthers

by

Isabella Paris Cowen

Submitted to The Department of Business and Economics

Project Advisor: Steve Onyeiwu

Second Reader: Chris Allison

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I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities as defined in the Honor Code and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the College as a whole.

Isabella Cowen

Bella Cowen

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents 1
List of Tables 3
List of Figures 4
Summary of AI Use by Author 5
Abstract 6
Chapter 1: Introduction 7
Chapter 2: Literature Review 9
Sports Marketing 9
The Three C's of Marketing: Consumer, Company, and Competition 10
Sports Marketing Mix 12
Sports Fans as Consumers 14
Marketing Strategies in Sports 18
The Promotion Mix 19
Major Media Types 22
Technology Advancements in Sports 23
Up and Coming… More like Down and Going 25
Gaps in Literature 26
Chapter 3: Background 27
The Sports Industry 27
Key Takeaways of the Sports Industry 44
The National Football League 45
Governance of the National Football League: Interview with Issac Gittens '14 49
Key Takeaways of the NFL and Teams 52
Pittsburgh Steelers 53
Green Bay Packers 55
Carolina Panthers 56
Fanatics, Inc. 56
Chapter 4: Empirical Analysis 60
John Wolfe with the Pittsburgh Steelers 62

Chrysta Jorgensen with the Green Bay Packers 70
Dawn Turner with the Carolina Panthers 78
Results 82
Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusion 85
Bibliography 90
About the Author 97

List of Tables

Table 1: Summary of Marketing Strategies of Case Studies 82

List of Figures

Figure 1: Push and Pull Strategy 21
Figure 2: Global Sports Marketing Revenue Breakdown by Sport 28
Figure 3: Pie Chart of Super Bowl LVII Ad Spots that Brands Bought by Industry 31
Figure 4: Global Sports Market Revenue Breakdown by Category 35
Figure 5: Revenue Breakdown of the National Football League by Category 47

Summary of AI Use by Author

AI has been used in this senior comprehensive project to assist with checking grammar, typos and refining words. It was not used to generate sources, or any topics and ideas within this paper.

Abstract

The National Football League (NFL) has been a rapidly growing and successful industry and brand. The NFL is consistent with keeping up with marketing trends to continue this success and engagement with its fans. Marketing strategies have been shifting from traditional strategies into digital and social media strategies to be tailored to connect the most effectively with the current population. Effective marketing strategies allow the NFL to engage with fans, boost overall attendance and revenue streams related to the league, and enhance their brand image and visibility. This paper explores these marketing strategies through case studies of the Pittsburgh Steelers, Green Bay Packers, and Carolina Panthers with the methodology of interviews with the heads of merchandise for each team. It was found that traditional marketing strategies have become less important, and the digital world has created more opportunities for NFL teams to market their merchandise the most successfully online. It was concluded that there are no uniform techniques that each NFL team focuses on, and each team combines different strategies that they feel are most effective for their company and brand.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this project is to examine and analyze marketing strategies used by the National Football League (NFL), focusing on the Pittsburgh Steelers, Green Bay Packers, and Carolina Panthers as case studies. These marketing strategies will be compared to see if there are uniform strategies used within the league and what mechanisms are used most frequently. This also relates to how much marketing plays a role in being successful within the NFL, compared to factors like player talent, coaching and leadership, management and financial stability, player/team success (wins and losses), and the community around the team. If there is no main difference in how the Steelers, Packers, and Panthers marketed their merchandise, then there is no universal set of marketing strategies that allows for the success of the teams. The significance of the study is to understand how NFL teams leverage marketing strategies for success. To do this, I will be exploring a multitude of different research and literature surrounding marketing as a whole and specific strategies teams use within the NFL and interviewing the heads of merchandise at each team. In all, I will be addressing the following research questions:

- What marketing strategies does the National Football League use most frequently? Do the teams use different marketing strategies?
- What makes a team a top player in the league? Wins and losses, their brand, or their marketing?
- How much of an impact does marketing have on the National Football League and individual teams in the league?

My hypothesis following these questions states that digital marketing, more specifically social media marketing, is the main form of marketing for these teams, compared to traditional

marketing strategies. The Pittsburgh Steelers and Green Bay Packers will use similar marketing strategies that will defer a little for the Panthers. This is believed because the Steelers and the Packers do their own merchandising in house and sell on their own “Pro Shop” website, while the Panthers do outsource marketing and partner with Fanatics, Inc. to do their merchandising. It is hypothesized that wins and losses are the biggest factor in being a top team in the NFL and these greatly impact marketing for a team. If a team is doing very well, they will have a stronger and larger fan presence and engagement. With this, NFL teams with strong marketing campaigns are more likely to see higher attendance and better social media engagement. Teams with active social media presence and fan interaction often see stronger ticket sales and a wider reach in merchandise sales.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This section will review existing literature on a range of topics pertinent to the research conducted within this comprehensive project. The literature will be organized into distinct subcategories that pertain to different themes, relationships, and backgrounds of the included research.

Sports Marketing

Schwarz and Hunter (2008) discuss sports marketing and give real-world examples and situations to relate to each topic that is discussed. Some of these topics are critical points to understand for my comprehensive project, as it gives a background of knowledge and understanding on key terms and connections related to my questions and analysis. To begin, they start with defining "sport", "business", and "marketing" all as separate terms to better understand how they relate to each other. Here, the authors explain the difference between "sport" and "sports" as well: sports refer to individual and team play of sport activities, while sport is an inclusive term that covers "activities, experiences, or business enterprises that center on athletics, health and wellness, recreation and leisure tie opportunities" (Schwarz and Hunter, p. 4, 2008). Next, they touch on how business, defined as "individuals or organizations that seek to make a profit by providing products and services that satisfy the needs, wants, and desires of the consumer" (Schwarz and Hunter, p. 5, 2008). This definition directly relates to the sports industry because sports organizations want to make a profit by providing products and services to fans for entertainment and to further connect them to their brand through many different revenue streams. Secondly, this industry has to be run by a business itself, which would be a sports management and administration team. People tend to confuse the term marketing; they

think the definition itself is marketing elements or components, but really it's the functions involved in the transfer of goods and services from producer to consumer (Schwarz and Hunter, p. 5, 2008). Understanding the importance of the consumer, the company, and the competition - the three C's of marketing analysis - are key to understanding marketing.

The Three C's of Marketing: Consumer, Company, and Competition

The first C of Marketing is the consumer; it is the person or organization that purchases goods or services and to reach them. Schwarz and Hunter (2008) discuss segmentation, targeting, positioning, and delivering. Segmentation refers to splitting up a large group into smaller groups that share a common characteristic; in this case, to split a large group of people into smaller groups that will respond to similar marketing strategies. This is important within the sports industry because it allows businesses to focus their efforts on specific groups of consumers to ensure a more effective marketing, improved customer satisfaction, and greater profitability. To split it up even more, Schwarz and Hunter (2008) explain four parts of segmentation: the consumer's state of being, the consumer's state of mind, product usage by consumers, and product benefits as perceived by consumers. The consumer's state of being belongs to a specified class or group, typically being but not limited to location, age, income level, gender, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Schwarz and Hunter, p. 6, 2008). These are all very critical to understand how to market different audiences. To give a simple example, a company would target a 40 year old father differently than a 12 year old girl. The consumer's state of mind refers to the individual cognitive processes involved in marketing, like individual personality traits, lifestyle changes, and individual preferences, which can each break up into many different aspects (Schwarz and Hunter, p. 6, 2008). Product usage by consumers breaks up the

consumption rates of the marketing segments. Finally, product benefits as perceived by consumers describes the assessment consumers do and how a product or service would benefit them. Following this, the reason for targeting is to "strive or aim for satisfying [the] desired market through concepts of exchange and relationships" by finding "the best way to get a product's image into the minds of consumers, and entice the consumer to purchase the product" (Schwarz and Hunter, p. 7, 2008). To do this, the Four P's of the Marketing Mix were created: product, price, place and promotion. These will be discussed in the following chapter to properly go into enough detail with examples. According to Schwarz and Hunter (2008), "how a company seeks to influence the perceptions of potential and current customers about the image of the company and its products and services" (p. 8) is called positioning. This concept works with the Marketing Mix with the goal of getting consumer's minds to react to it and it affects positively toward their specific company. Humans are known to make first impressions and these are very difficult to change, so it's important for companies to be the first to make that impression or make an impression that aligns with the consumers, both making the product or service easier to sell (Schwarz and Hunter, p. 8, 2008). If the company already has competition and cannot be the first one to the market, then the Marketing Mix becomes a major strategy to grab the attention of consumers. The more aligned the companies are with their consumers, the more likely they are to purchase from them. This can relate to all aspects of the sports industry – selling athletic gear or merchandise to selling game tickets, and how these companies position themselves to be the most effective and successful in the industry. Lastly, delivery is the act of following through and achieving the task that a consumer desires. This is the final step of the way a company should market to their consumers. Well said by Schwarz and Hunter (2008) to sum it all together, delivery is the completion of the implementation phase, which consists of the last three ideas that

were just discussed, and the start of the management aspect, where the creative and process aspects of marketing are applied (p. 9).

Sports Marketing Mix

As mentioned before, the Marketing Mix is key to creating a company's target market and makes up the sports market and the overall industry. Product, price, place, and promotion make up the Marketing Mix, hence the second name, The Four P's. Kotler & Armstrong (2001) define the sports marketing mix as "the set of controllable tactical marketing tools that the firm blends to produce the responses that it wants in the target market (p. 28). Schwarz and Hunter (2008) explain that these have to do with marketing for all companies, but specifically for sports marketing there is an extra P added: publicity, because there is so much more media that comes into play (p. 7). These strategies are important because they make or break the outlook from the consumer. If the consumer is not attracted to or influenced by how the company is trying to pull them in, their strategy is pointless and they waste time and money. Kim & Shin (2008) go into great detail about the original Four P's, which will be discussed as follows (p. 73). Firstly, a product is a tangible and intangible benefits that buyers will obtain. Some examples of products can be a ticket to a game or a form of transportation or a sweatshirt from a sports team or it can be a service, like someone driving you to the stadium. Price is the value or cost of the product that must be given in order to obtain said product. Each of the previous examples have to be purchased with money in order to obtain the item or service. Place is the geographic location of the product, for example a movie theater or stadium. Promotion is the process in which various techniques are used to communicate with consumers. The final piece, publicity, has seen to be separated from promotion because it too encompasses so much since of the large change in

marketing within the last decade because of the use of technology. Schwarz and Hunter (2008) state that publicity, also known as public relations, is "the methods and activities utilized to establish and promote awareness with the public by disseminating information through various media outlets" (p. 22). All in all, a successful and effective marketing plan will incorporate and blend all of these strategies together into a coordinated plan (Kim & Shin, p. 73, 2008).

All of the sectors of the marketing mix, whether it be the 4 or 5, create an effective marketing strategy. If there is no difference in a product or service, consumers would not be drawn to them and they would stick with their original one. Schwarz and Hunter (2008) go into detail about more effective decisions for companies to keep in mind when creating a strategy for marketing relating to (p. 22-23). Product impact is how much impact putting a specific product or service in the market will be: will it increase or have a return investment or if the product be introduced in a broader way to increase the possibility of said return. Potential risks introduce the idea of the probability that the marketing effort will be successful. Related to this is related to how high the success rate is, how lucky are competitors to respond to a better option, and risks that are taken for not pursuing the marketing strategy. Feasibility is described as "needing to be realistic and practical" (Cohen, 2006). This can relate to technical, financial, and political aspects. Technical aspects are whether or not there are enough resources, like space, staff, and customers; financial aspects being related to affordability, cash flow and net income implication, and political aspects being if there is any support from stakeholder (Schwarz and Hunter, p. 23, 2008).

In order to create a more unique product, differentiation is also incorporated with the marketing mix, in which Schwarz and Hunter (2008) define it as "the concept of being, creating, and demonstrating distinct and specialized characteristics of sport products and services as com-

pared to those of its competitors" (p. 23). This includes many aspects that this concept is centered around that these authors also explore. Purchasing incorporates quantity discounts and package deals; products that improve features of extensions; distribution elements like faster delivery, ease of purchasing products, increase opportunities to purchase the product; marketing communications through public, media and community relations; sales activities exploring appropriate pricing of products, selling products with features consumers need and want; and consumer service activities that convey product information, availability to effectively and efficiently deal with their problem and questions (Schwarz and Hunter, p. 23, 2008).

The Sports Marketing Mix is very important within the concept of the sports industry because it provides a framework for sports organizations and brands to market towards their audiences the most effectively, while building relationships with their fans, and being successful overall.

Sports Fans as Consumers

Consumers are a main part of marketing, and understanding them is critical in order to know the audience and how to attract them to your business, product, or service. Fans are attracted to different attributes of sports, whether it be a specific sport itself, a team, a player, the environment, etc. No matter why or how they are connected to one of these aspects, they are all bonded for the same reason, even if they come from various backgrounds. Da Silva (2017) dives into the concepts behind sports fans as a form of consumer through different literature how the unique characteristics of sports fans influence their consumption behavior and how this can be leveraged by sports organizations and marketers to effectively engage with fans and drive sales. The author argues that the consumer "can be regarded as the most essential in the business of

sport club" as it is the "initial driver for a sport club's growth is the development of a fan-base" (Da Silva, p. 37, 2017).

The article defines a sports fan as "the person who thinks, talks about and is oriented towards sports even when – the fan – is not actually observing, or reading, or listening to an account of a specific sport event", who is consistent, dedicated and loyal (Da Silva, p. 37, 2017). In order to be a true fan, classifications are broken down into three categories: cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral. Understanding how these classifications are broken down is key to the sports industry and its success because it focuses on how these organizations draw in different types of consumers to bring in the most engagement and revenue. Da Silva (2017) explains that cognitive relates to the consumer being able to build up knowledge about the sport and team, attitudinal meaning the consumer believes strongly in the team and sport, even if their performance level decrease, and finally, behavioral shows that the fans commitment through tangible acts, like purchasing tickets or merchandise (p. 37). These categories aim to explain the difference between a spectator, someone who isn't emotionally invested in a sport or team and will watch a game for entertainment purposes. The important aspect when looking at the difference between the two is the level of passion (Da Silva, p. 37, 2017).

While this is the overview of the idea of fans, there are classifications of fans that depend on loyalty and are based on four key drivers that Da Silva (2017) explains very well. Understanding these drivers allows them to tailor strategies to meet all needs, preferences, and behaviors of different fan groups. The first driver is pure entertainment, which is linked to the team's success and is more likely to lead to short-term loyalty. The second, authenticity, looks at fans' perceptions of the game as real and meaningful, no matter if the team is winning or losing. Fan bonding looks at the personal attachment between fans and a team or the players; this dives

into the fans feeling like they impact the team, especially when it relates to success. Last is history and traditions, it looks at the team's previous record of achievement and richness of the club's culture (Da Silva, p. 38, 2017). The classifications of fans are aficionado, theatregoer, passionate partisan, champ follower, reclusive partisan. Diving into details related to both of these aspects, an aficionado is a fan who is loyal to the sport but not to a specific team and wants to see games that have good performances. Theatregoer has only little loyalty to the team and gets a thrill from the entertainment and enjoyment from the game. These classifications are connected by the attraction to the sport and no attachment to a team, but the next three are connected because they're all attached to a team. Passionate partisan identifies strongly with the favorite team, is faithful, attends games often and follows the team through good and bad times. The champ follower follows teams that are successful because that is what excites them and that is where they are loyal to. Finally, the reclusive partisan is loyal to the team, but attends games only occasionally; they might follow a team also through media channels, and others typically have influence to their behaviour (Da Silva, p. 39-40, 2017). The most loyal fans are the least likely to switch teams no matter the conditions. Knowing how certain fans act, organizations can tailor their goals to these groups and create effective ways to generate the most success between each of these categories rather than focusing on their demographics at a large scale.

Another take on the classification of fan's comes from Wiid and Cant (2015) in exploring the different sport fan groupings: temporary, local, devoted, fanatical, and dysfunctional (p. 386-387). Firstly, temporary sports fans have very low motivation levels and their interest in a sport is specific and only for a specific amount of time, which their interest can disappear after that time limit. This type of fan is explained to be present "as long as the benefits of fan-ship outweigh the costs" (Wiid and Cant, p. 386, 2015). Local fans are people who support a certain

local team, athlete, or sport because they were born or currently live in a certain region or city. Local fans will retract their support if they move away. Devoted fans are committed to have high levels of loyalty and identification with a team, athlete, or sport. They are not as easily influenced to withdraw their support even if there is low performance or geographical area, yet feel personally affected by a win or loss. The fanatical fan has a very deep commitment to the team, athlete, or sport they support and being a fan becomes a huge part of their personality. These fans will spend a lot of time and money supporting them by going to the games, buying merchandise, etc. Finally, dysfunctional fans make supporting a team, athlete or sport the main source of their personality, out of their devotion for their team above their family and other responsibilities. They will become antisocial and aggressive easily, like fans who are very hostile and use vulgar behavior.

It is important to understand the classifications and division of fans because companies have to target people differently because people are not all the same, they have different aspects and interests to them that make them unique to one another. A large range of marketing strategies is needed for this to attract maximum target audiences for a product or service to then gain the maximum engagement and continued support and loyalty. Fans that feel that a brand, company, or product is tailored to their needs are more likely to develop strong emotional connections and stay loyal over time. By segmenting fans, marketers can develop specific loyalty programs and qualities that reward fans for their engagement, whether it's attending games, purchasing merchandise, or watching content regularly. Fans can be divided into categories based on age, location, income, interests, individuals and fan behaviors, and more. For example, fans have different spending habits and capabilities. People that are devoted fans will most likely be willing to pay for more tickets, travel, merchandise, streaming services and more rather than someone

who would only buy something related to their favorite team or athlete once a year as a special purchase because of their engagement and loyalty level. On the flip side, some fans might be really loyal but instead of actually going to a game, they might spend more money on good streaming services to be able to watch all of a team's games. All in all, recognizing the diverse needs and behaviors of different fan groups, businesses can develop tailored messages, products, and experiences that resonate deeply with their audience to gain a constant revenue stream. This approach ensures that every fan, whether casual or passionate, feels valued and engaged with the brand as well, which is one of the important factors.

Marketing Strategies in Sports

Coleman (2001) explains sports marketing techniques and how the sports industry is adapting to new trends in order to keep fans engaged as traditional marketing has been suffering because "organizations demanded more return for their promotional dollar" (p. 197).

Firstly, sponsorships have become a main source of revenue for the sports industry as a whole. It allows for the relationship to be two-way "since the influx of monies has proved equally effective as the revenue producer for sport organization and the media who cover activities" (Coleman, p. 196, 2001). Sponsorships have added the benefit of reaching a target market easier and more effectively. Because of the popularity of the sports market and industry, businesses who are seen to sponsor teams or athletes are seen to be engaged with the community, which shows good citizenship, they generate products and services that the public wants and appreciates, while sharing favorable media interest and publicly (Coleman, p. 197, 2001). The athlete who is being sponsored as a spokesperson or product endorser gains profit that goes toward their income because of these promotions and in return, businesses get a lot of exposure

and revenue from the rising demand of sports teams and athletes (Coleman, p. 197, 2001). Male athletes have always been the predominant people in the spotlight, but over the last couple of decades, women have made themselves known in the athletic world. Since the rise, sponsors have focused on giving female athletes large and more sponsorship deals. The use of sponsorships not only benefits the company and figure involved, but it affects the trends of the sport industry as well. By sponsoring more women athletes in the past, their presence in sports has also increased. Stadium naming and uniform creation have both become huge in the sponsorship industry. Major companies look to get the most bang for their buck, so why would they not invest in what a team is wearing everyday or where their home games are held. These are two main ways a company can get their name out, while the team has a constant stream of revenue, where everyone can see it very frequently.

The Promotion Mix

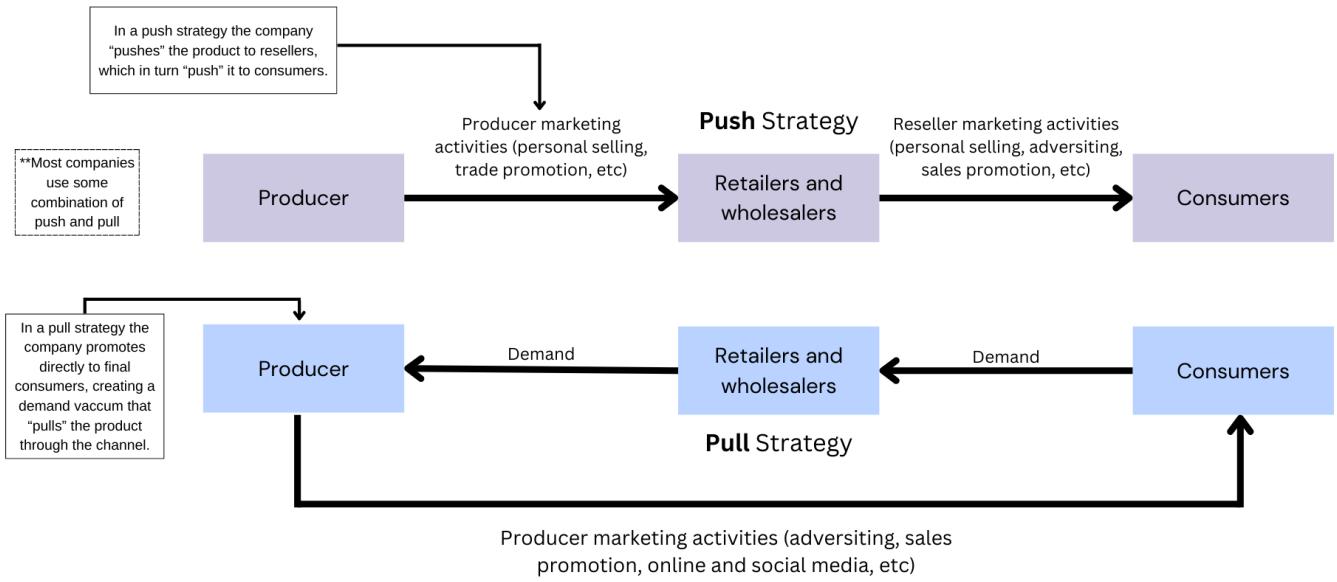
In order for a company to properly build a target market and achieve its goal of reaching it, the promotional mix, or marketing communications mix, was created as a way to properly do so. This mix is made up of five techniques: advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, public relations, and direct and digital marketing (Kotler and Armstrong, p. 424, 2018). Kotler and Armstrong (2018) go into detail about each of these and that is where I am getting all the following information from within this section. To bring with advertising, this is any paid nonpersonal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods, or services by an identical sponsor. This includes broadcast, print, online, mobile, outdoor, and other events (p. 425). Advertising is important because it reaches a large audience a multitude of times. It “says something positive about the seller’s size, popularity, and success” as they can be viewed as more legitimate (p.

439). Advertising can be expressive, used to build up a long-term image for a product, and can trigger quick sales (p. 439). Sales promotion is short-term incentives to encourage the purchase or sale of a product or service. Examples of these include discounts, coupons, displays, demonstrations, and events. These all attract a consumer's attention and offer strong incentives to purchase, which lead to quick response and rewards for them. These are not as effective as advertising or personal selling in building long-run brand preference and consumer relationships (p. 440). Speaking of personal selling, this is personal consumer interactions by the firm's sales force for the purpose of engaging customers, making sales, and building consumer relationships. This includes sales presentations, trade shows, and incentive programs (p. 425). Kotler & Armstrong (2018) describe this as "the most effective tool at certain stages of the buying process, particularly in building up buyers' preferences" (p. 439). It is very direct and personal because it involves consumer relationships, making sure their needs are met. This will create long-term relationships and the buyer feels a greater need to respond (p. 440). Fourth is public relations, which is building good relations with the company's various publics by obtaining favorable publicity, building up a good corporate image, and handling or heading off unfavorable rumours, stories, and events. Public relations includes press releases, sponsorships, events, and webpage (p. 425). Public relations can reach people that avidly avoid salespeople and advertisements and can really dramatize a product or company. Mixed with other elements, it can be very effective and economical (p. 440). Finally, direct marketing engages directly with carefully targeted individual consumers and customer communities to both obtain an immediate response and build lasting customer relationships. Direct marketing examples are direct mail, email, catalogs, online, and social media, mobile marketing, and more (p. 425). This form of marketing is more targeted, immediate, and personalized. These messages can be prepared quickly, tailored to

appeal to individual consumers or brand groups, allowing for dialogue between the marketing team and the consumer (p. 440).

These marketing mix forms can be used through two promotional strategies: push or pull promotion. Push promotion is when the product is through a marketing channel to final consumers (p. 440). The pull strategy is when the producer directs its marketing activities toward the final consumer to induce them to buy the product (p. 440). Below shows a visual chart to demonstrate this flow of these two formations:

Figure 1: Push and Pull Strategy Diagram



Source: Kotler and Armstrong (2018)

The National Football League uses the pull promotional strategy majorly because it focuses on creating demand through fan interes and making the league's content and products desirable. By leveraging social media, exclusive content, influencer marketing, and fan-driven campaigns, the NFL generates excitement and interest that pulls fans in to actively engage with

the brand. The more fans feel a personal connection to the league and its teams, the more they will "pull" NFL content toward themselves, whether it's attending a game, watching on TV, purchasing merchandise, or interacting on social media.

Major Media Types

There are seven major media types that companies find most effective and that have been the most popular. How a specific media is chosen (or multiple) depends on the target market and how they can be reached the most efficiently and effectively. These seven media types are television, digital, mobile, social media, newspapers, direct mail, magazines, radio and outdoor (Kotler and Armstrong, p. 465, 2018). There are many advantages and disadvantages of all these forms of media and Kotler and Armstrong (2018):

Television is good for mass marketing coverage, the cost of low per exposure, it gives a great viewing experience for the audience (includes sight, sud, and motion), and it's appealing to all the senses. Some limitations include high overall costs, high clutter, has less audience selectivity, and has fleeting exposure. Digital, mobile, and social media is good because it has a high selectivity, it's low cost, and allows for large engagement. Limitations include potentially low impact, high audience control of content and exposure. Newspapers have become way less popular today, but they have been very flexible, have good local coverage, broad acceptability, and high believability. Along with becoming less popular, they have a short life, poor reproduction quality, and small audience. Direct mail has also decreased in popularity recently, while also having a relatively high cost per exposure and deals with "junk mail". Some advantages are high audience selectivity, it's flexible, there is no ad competition within the same

medium, and allows for personalization. Magazines have a high geographic and demographic selectivity, are credible and prestigious, have high quality of reproduction, are long life and good pass-along readership. On the other side, magazines have a long ad purchase lead time, they have high costs, and no guarantee of position. Radios have good local acceptable, high geography and demographic selectivity, and are low cost. Some limitations are that it's audio only, has fleeting exposure, has low attention, and fragmented audiences. Finally, it is outdoor, which has high flexibility, high repeat exposure, is low cost, has low message competitions, and has good positional selectivity. But, it has such a little audience and creates limitations because it's so selective (p. 466).

Technology Advancements in Sports

Technology has become one of the most critical parts in people's everyday lives and it is expanding very quickly in terms of what can be accomplished digitally. This has shaped the sports industry as a whole and the advancements that have been made are critical for companies to take advantage of to continue the growth and engagement of sports.

JINGA (2024) dives into how sports organizations must adopt an integrated and forward-looking approach that combines digital marketing, innovative management, sustainability, social responsibility, and entrepreneurial innovation. It is explained that sports organizations will remain relevant by effectively engaging their fans in a constantly evolving environment by "creating and managing sports brands, developing fan engagement, and monetization through various channels. Branding in sports isn't just about logos and colors; it's about building a strong identity and a culture that resonates with fans, contributing to long-term loyalty" (JINGA, p. 588, 2024). Social media has risen in the marketing world majorly as of

recent, and will continue to take over traditional marketing strategies. Its platforms allow brands to interact directly with their fans through platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, X, to create a stronger engaged community through exclusive content (JINGA, p. 588, 2024). Next, content marketing provides fans with emotional and engaging content to really feel connected to a player, team or brand as a whole. With this, companies create “valuable, relevant, and consistent materials to attract and retain a clearly defined audience”, which “include blog articles, videos, podcasts, and infographics that tell the team's history, memorable moments, or interviews with athletes (JINGA, p. 588, 2024). Augmented Reality (AR) has also been up and coming the last decade, and allows for fans to get a detailed, real, visual experience.

A lot of marketing has shifted to be mostly online. Online marketing can be defined as marketing via the media, internet, email, websites, blogs, social media, and more. Most companies have marketing websites, where they allow their customers to have easy access to not only their products and services, but also the information and statement behind their business as whole as well. They are supposed to be easy to navigate and a way to draw consumers to purchase from them. Online advertising has stemmed from this by a way to get consumers to click and shift their attention to their company and services through display ads, search-related ads, online classifieds and more on websites and social media (Kolter & Armstrong, p. 517, 2018).

Social media has become a top marketing tool used by companies all over. There have been many platforms that popup and companies will join these if their respective crowd is on them. If they know their audience is using a specific app, why not throw an ad on it for them to see and potentially click on. Companies have also been joining on these platforms themselves and posting their own digital content to great traction for their business. This method is called

viral marketing, where an ad or video will go viral on a specific platform or app and it will continue to be spread amongst the platform and gain heavy attention.

Blogs are another form of digital marketing that target a specific audience. These are "online forums where people and companies post their thoughts and other content, usually related to a specific topic" (Kolter & Armstrong, p. 520, 2018). Blogs are a good source for marketing because they can be about anything and there is always a group that follows that topic. Bloggers also use social media platforms to continue their message and attract a greater audience surrounding their chosen subject.

A lot of companies still rely heavily on email marketing, when they send highly targeted, personalized messages through email. Emails have become a very directive tool whose goal is changed through every email that is sent. For example, each email is highly personalized and specific through engaging, colorful content that is sent out to a very specific audience, depending on what is being marketed.

Up and Coming… More like Down and Going

Shifting over to marketing strategies that are on the downfall (traditional marketing strategies), let's begin with direct-mail marketing. This is when a company will send "an offer, announcement, reminder, or other item to a person at a particular address" (Kolter & Armstrong, p. 528, 2018). Each message sent required a target audience list and works like email marketing as mail marketing is used to be direct and personalized. Although many companies have shifted to online marketing, some people still request things sent by the mail, but it varies between generations. An advantage of mail marketing is that it gives people something to physically hold

and see. This allows consumers to be reminded of it more and feel more connected to it since they are seeing it in real time (Kolter & Armstrong, p. 528, 2018).

Another marketing tool that was successful in the past but is on the decline is direct-response television marketing. This is marketing done on the television, like advertisements and commercials. Marketers air television segments, normally 60 or 120 seconds long, to describe a product and give customers the option to call a number or visit a website to view the offer that was on screen (Kolter & Armstrong, p. 530, 2018). These are normally loud, incentive ads that you would see on television between segments of your favorite movie or show.

Gaps in Literature

There are a few gaps within the literature I read that should be addressed and resolved within my research. Firstly, the majority of the articles I read used surveys and questionnaires, but for my empirical analysis I will use real data from the Pittsburgh Steelers, Green Bay Packers, and Carolina Panthers to measure the success of marketing strategies. Specifically, I will interview each of the Heads of Merchandising at these three teams to gather real world information and apply them to previous research, then I will compare the strategies used by each of the teams.

Chapter 3: Background

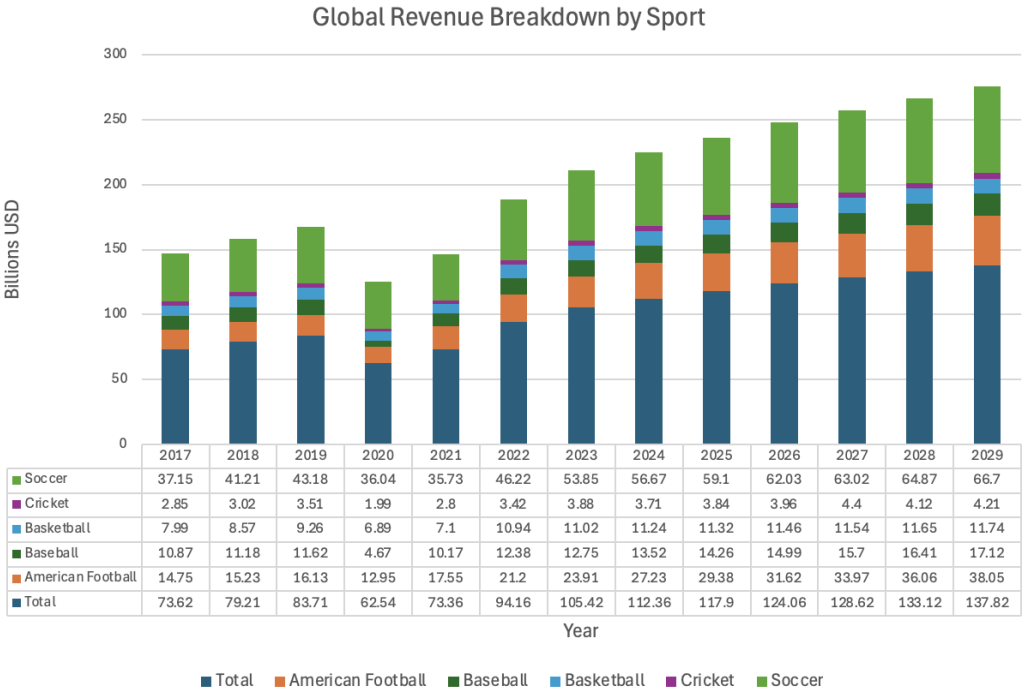
This section will dive into the background and history of all that is encompassed within this senior project. It will begin with going in the most detail about the Sports Industry itself and then shift specifically to the National Football League, as it is the league that I am researching within my senior project. Next, this section will discuss the individual teams that I chose to do case studies on – the Pittsburgh Steelers, the Green Bay Packers, and the Carolina Panthers. Finally to close, Fanatics, Inc. will be discussed because of its partnership with the Carolina Panthers in doing their merchandise, which is critical to understand within my empirical chapter.

The Sports Industry

The Sports Industry is a rapidly growing, global industry that encompasses all things related to the production, management, promotion of all sports events, leagues and teams. This can encompass professional, college, esports, club, amateur and recreational sports, and they all have a large variety of different market structures, engagement, and revenue. As an example, the Olympics will get way more viewership, attendance, and revenue compared to a Division III college football game. Alongside this idea, there are also major distinctions between individual play and team play sports based on level of fan involvement, costs, marketing, and overall economic differences; this can be the difference between football and tennis. Most obviously, everyone thinks that this industry includes just the entertainment side of watching sports and being engaged with specific teams, but the marketing aspect is an even more important side of this industry that people don't always pay attention to, yet are involved in more day to day than the entertainment side.

The Sports Industry will be forever growing and evolving. Although not everyone chooses to purchase tickets and attend games, they are still providing ways to support their team, like the growth of their engagement and revenue; for example, buying streaming services to watch from home, purchasing merchandise to show off on their person or household, or logging on to social media platforms to check on their team's socials. All of these enhance the brands of individual teams, athletes, and the industry as a whole. As of the year of 2023, the global sports market reached a value of $484.9 billion and it is expected to grow to $651 billion in 2028 (Research and Markets). This number can be divided into many sectors of the industry: revenue from entertainment, sports media, sponsorships, sports equipment and merchandise, technology, and tourism.

Figure 2: Global Sports Market Revenue Breakdown by Sport



	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029
Soccer	37.15	41.21	43.18	36.04	35.73	46.22	53.85	56.67	59.1	62.03	63.02	64.87	66.7
Cricket	2.85	3.02	3.51	1.99	2.8	3.42	3.88	3.71	3.84	3.96	4.4	4.12	4.21
Basketball	7.99	8.57	9.26	6.89	7.1	10.94	11.02	11.24	11.32	11.46	11.54	11.65	11.74
Baseball	10.87	11.18	11.62	4.67	10.17	12.38	12.75	13.52	14.26	14.99	15.7	16.41	17.12
American Football	14.75	15.23	16.13	12.95	17.55	21.2	23.91	27.23	29.38	31.62	33.97	36.06	38.05
Total	73.62	79.21	83.71	62.54	73.36	94.16	105.42	112.36	117.9	124.06	128.62	133.12	137.82

Source: Statista Market Insights (2024)

First and foremost, revenue the sports industry brings in comes from many different sectors. Most people think the most about ticket, concessions, and merchandise sales, but it also includes parking costs and additional VIP experiences. Sports licensing is “the process of granting rights to third parties to use the intellectual property of sports teams, leagues, and athletes for commercial purposes” and is demonstrated through the use of logos, team names, athletes, on things like apparel, collectibles, video games, and more (Yellowbrick). Secondly, merchandising is creating a brand or product that is associated with a particular league, brand, or team. This can range from a long list of things that people can buy, from sweatshirts, hats, jerseys, sneakers, to even sports equipment (Yellowbrick). Both of these are crucial for the revenue of the sports industry as whole and revenue for individual leagues and teams. Not only are they big factors in generating revenue that contributes to their financial stability and player development (Yellowbrick) but it also connects the fans to their favorite teams and athletes (Yellowbrick).

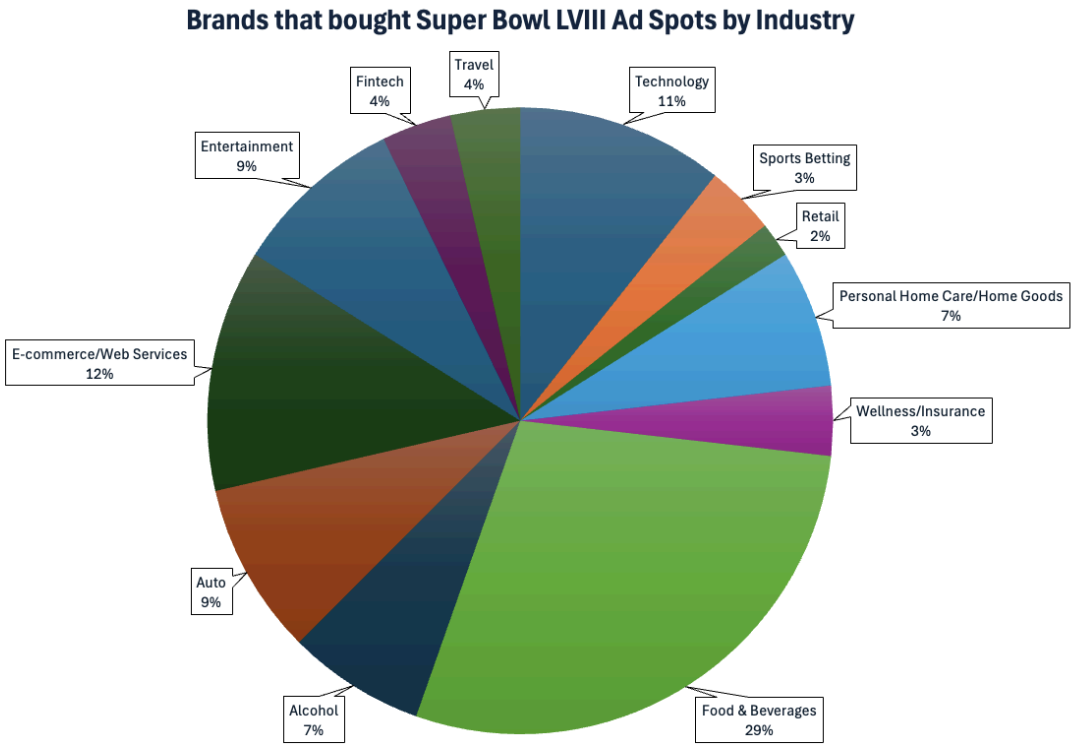
Next, one of the most prominent revenue generators for each sport is actually the broadcasting and media rights. There has been a huge rise in streaming services not only all over the United States, but also throughout the world, allowing people to watch sports events that are happening from anywhere. A few examples of these are Amazon Prime, ESPN+, ACC and SEC Network, Peacock, and many more (ESPN). In 2022, a huge deal covered by the New York Times was “the NFL signed new media rights agreements with CBS, NBC, Fox, ESPN and Amazon collectively worth about $110 billion over 11 years, nearly doubling the value of its previous contracts,” that started in 2023 and will run through the 2033 season (New York Times). Again, allowing for games to be streamed all over the United States and parts of the world is amazing for the growth of support for the leagues and fan engagement. Some people aren’t ever

able to attend sports events, so by providing them a way to still be involved with the teams and to be able to watch is incredible. In July of 2024, The National Basketball Association (NBA) announced the “renewal of its partnership with The Walt Disney Company and new agreements with NBCUniversal (NBCU) and Amazon under which ABC/ESPN, NBC/Peacock and Prime Video will telecast NBA games beginning with the 2025-26 season and running through the 2035-36 season” (NBA). A multitude of sports leagues have partnered with traditional TV services and streaming services to make their content available to watch to anyone anytime. Although cheaper than going to an actual event hosted by a team, the services introduce other resources, like behind the scenes or other live content for viewers to experience, so they are getting something that can contrast to their game day experience.

Sponsorships can emerge from these media and streaming deals, which in turn is a huge income source as well. Individual sports organizations and specific athletes can get brand exposure from these broadcasting and media rights. For example, sponsors know that the Super Bowl is one of the most watched sports events each year. This past Super Bowl (2025), there was an estimated 127.7 million viewers that watched (Nielsen). To take advantage of this, they fight for seconds in commercials that are played during the entirety of the game. With the average cost of running a 30 second ad during the Super Bowl being $7 million (Statista), the Super Bowl advertising revenue was $600 million in 2023 (Statista). In 2025, there were around a total of 68 different brands that paid for an ad during the Super Bowl (Brand Innovations). Beer and soft drinks dominated the ads in the 2025 Super Bowl, specifically Budweiser, Michelob Ultra, and Coors Light have spent tens of millions on commercials (Merca). Technology and telecommunications were above their numbers last year as Amazon, T-Mobile, and Verison increased their advertising investment (Merca). Finally, entertainment and automobiles had less

of a presence. As an example, BMW and Volkswagen chose not to be featured in this year's Super Bowl (Merca). For a better visual understanding, and although it's from the 2024 Super Bowl – as it is the most recent data that has been collected, below is a chart that summarizes the different businesses and industries that were advertised.

Figure 3: Pie Chart of Super Bowl LVII Ad Spots that Brands bought by Industry



Source: Liebergall (2024)

From all the viewership between plays of a football game or a timeout of a basketball game, broadcasts can significantly enhance brand visibility and exposure. Organizations rely heavily on sponsorships to fund their operations, player salaries, marketing, and other essential activities. For many decades, many sports leagues and teams have reached out to major brands to sponsor them to increase their brand awareness by creating a positive brand image through teams while sharing similar values with them. For example, in 2015, Adidas and Manchester United, an English premier league soccer club, signed a 10-year $1.3 billion deal, which at the time was the largest kit sponsorship deal in sports history (Jersey Watch). On Manchester United's website, they share that both Adidas and them "have excited fans around the world with forward-thinking initiatives, iconic designs on the pitch and fan-favourite culturewear off of it" (Manchester United). Along with providing sales and revenue for one another, sponsorships allow for engagement between their fans and to reach a demographic the brand is working for that aligns with their products. Not only do brands collaborate and sponsor whole teams, but they also sponsor specific athletes through Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL). Michael Jordan, a very well known NBA player who played for 15 years (1984-2003), signed a $2.5 million deal with Nike back in 1984. This later turned into the Air Jordan brand which created great advancements for the sneaker industry all over the world (Jersey Watch). In 2020, they launched BBC, known as"Black Community Commitment", which encompasses institutional, community, and family grants. With this, "Nike committed $40 million over four years and the Jordan Brand and Michael Jordan committed $100 million over 10 years" (Nike). Sponsorships can be completely digital through the media as well, through social media campaigns and influencer marketing, an example being Nike's "Just Do It" campaign. Sports teams can post on social media promoting a game or event, getting opinions from fans online, having an athlete post wearing or using a

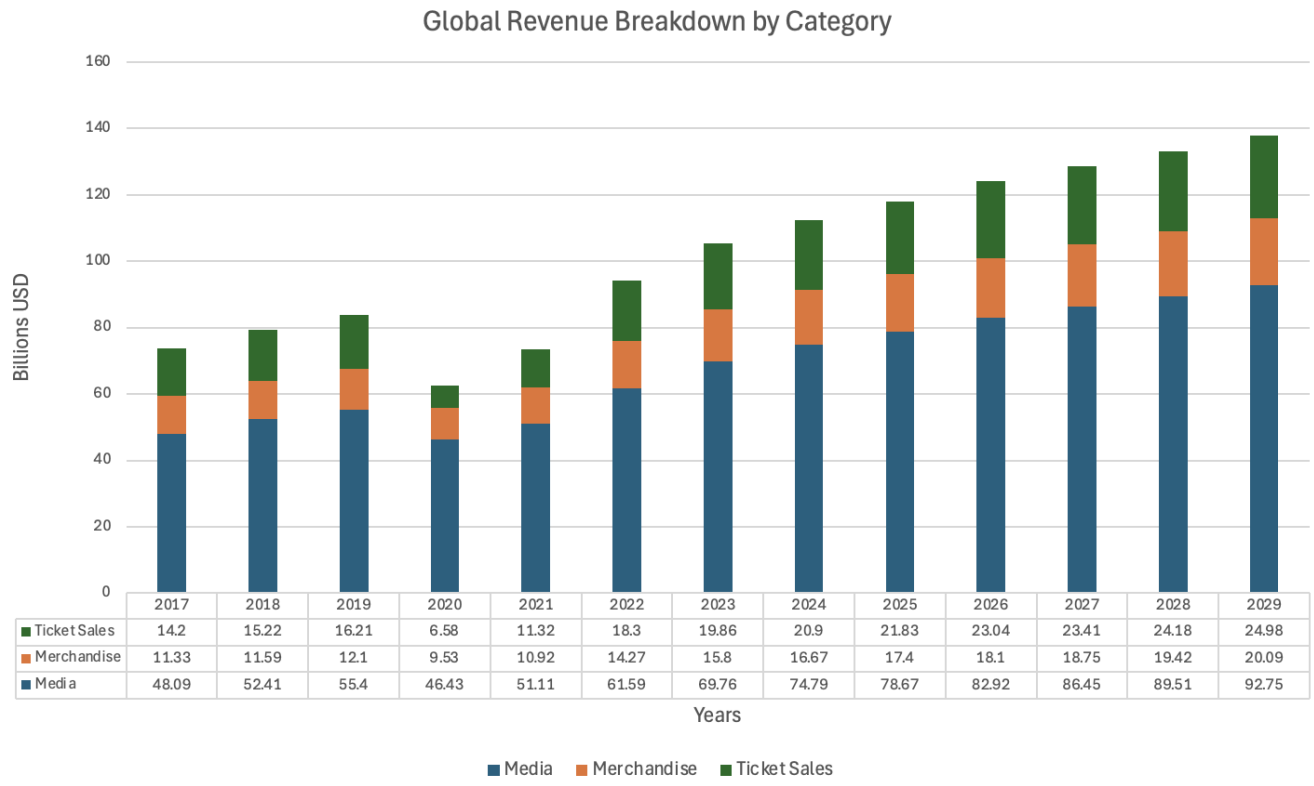
certain brand or product, or using platforms for emerging trends and hashtags to gather audience from those departments.

Speaking of the use of social media and the digital world, this is another key sector in the revenue of the sports industry. Not only do sports events and games get streamed on TV platforms, but they also stream on Youtube and are available to watch extra content they upload there and on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and more. Social media is critical for keeping fans engaged and up to date on happenings with any program or league. Loyal and engaged fans are more likely to check in on and follow their favorite teams and players on social media and up to date with their content. Teams and athletes can instantly respond to fan comments, repost fan-created content, and even create interactive polls and contests that drive engagement up. This idea carries back into team's posting about events and games that are coming up to encourage people to watch or go, athletes posting about sponsorship deals, and encouraging them to buy merchandise. These apps can also be used as marketing platforms for targeting market advertisements and promotions. Buying merchandise, exclusive content, tickets, and more has never been easier and you are able to do it all right from your mobile device within a few minutes, which allows for quicker and more purchases. The digital world creates a whole new destination for all of the factors that go into revenue that have been discussed too, like I've briefly been discussing, like streaming games online, sponsorship deals, and fan loyalty.

Tourism plays a role in the revenue of the sports industry because it is always rapidly growing. As of 2023, $91.8 billion were spent by United States sports-travelers, events organizers, and venues. $13.5 billion was for transportation, $10.9 billion was spent on lodging, and food and beverages totaled to $9.7 billion (Tourism Economics). The sports-events industry had "a direct economic impact of $52.2 billion, $128 billion in total economic impact and

generated $20.1 billion in taxes and more than 200 million people traveled to youth and adult amateur sports, plus collegiate championships" (Tourism Economics). This stat brings up many crucial things that will be broken up by number. As for $52.2 billion represents the immediate financial success generated by the expenses associated with organizing, hosting, and attending events: ticket sales, accommodations, transportation, and concessions. $128 billion refers to the direct and indirect costs associated with the sports industry. This includes the downstream effects from local businesses, job creation, and increased demand for goods and services surrounding the location of the event, like restaurants, hotels, transportation services, and retailers. The sports industry does generally have a decent amount of tax revenue – $20.1 billion going to all layers of the government. These taxes are paid by individuals from these sports events that will help fund public services and infrastructure. Finally, there were a total of 200 million people that traveled to attend many levels of sports: youth and adult amateur sports events and collegiate championships. This is important to note because it gives insight on how high the demand is to travel for sporting events and it involves more than just professional sports. The growth continued into 2024 and that year had a total revenue of $685.0 billion, with football/soccer at $260.3 billion, and cricket at $164.4 billion, motorsport at $95.9 billion, tennis at $89.1 billion, and other sports at $75.4 billion (Market US). People travel for very popular sporting events all year round, whether it be for college rivalry football games, the Super Bowl, the World Cup, the Olympics, and more, so this industry will be forever growing. This also correlates greatly to the importance of internationalization and globalization.

Figure 4: Global Sports Market Revenue Breakdown by Category



	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029
Ticket Sales	14.2	15.22	16.21	6.58	11.32	18.3	19.86	20.9	21.83	23.04	23.41	24.18	24.98
Merchandise	11.33	11.59	12.1	9.53	10.92	14.27	15.8	16.67	17.4	18.1	18.75	19.42	20.09
Media	48.09	52.41	55.4	46.43	51.11	61.59	69.76	74.79	78.67	82.92	86.45	89.51	92.75

Source: Statista Market Insights (2024)

Both internationalization and globalization are key factors in the sports market. Firstly, internationalization is the process of expanding something international. As a bigger goal, globalization is key to the growth of this market as it broadens the demographic to all over the world and allows for many advancements and faster growth. Not only do these introduce new cultures and fanbase, but it also expands viewership, economic growth, and the brand itself. Firstly, culturalization is amazing for both groups and countries involved and allows for understanding and growth. It gives appreciation for diversity, promotes collaboration that can lead to innovation through the blending of different ideas. Alongside this, it creates cross-cultural appeal and integrates football into the lifestyle of fans across different places and that are very

different from one another. Secondly, it can allow for growth within the specific sports industries or teams by recruiting higher level players. It can bring amazing athletes from other countries to enhance the leagues talent and continues to bring interest to the sports in general and within the United States to increase its appeal and popularity. Next, the fanbase of sports overall and for specific sports, leagues, and teams increases because there is a wider viewbase to be interacting with the market. This can lead to hosting events and having sponsorships that can be held across the world, which increases revenue and engagement. The revenue in the digital and merchandising industries will increase because more people will be purchasing things to support and watch their favorite teams even if they are hosted in the United States, like streaming services and t-shirts. All in all, these all show a positive impact between the sports industry and stretching all that encompasses it into other countries and parts of the world and how these all grow individual brands as another plus.

Although the sports industry is overall very positive and successful, there are some challenges within it that need to be discussed. Firstly, the economic uncertainty of finances and the economy will always be a challenge. As a huge and relevant issue that brands are still building back from to this day, we saw this during the health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Cho, Shin, etc al (2023) explores the pamdemic's effects on the sports industry and globalization, while specifically looking at cases in the United States and Japan. The authors explain that numerous sports events at both the global and local levels have either been canceled, postponed, or implemented new spectator guidelines. Examples for these include wearing masks and limited occupancy at events, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics getting postponed until summer of 2021, the NBA suspending their season for 85 days (ESPN), the WNBA changing their schedule after postponing their season (ESPN), and many smaller leagues and schools canceling their

seasons around the world. Due to all the cancellations, there was a negative impact on employment. An example from ESPN is, “of the 52,450 people the NBA employs, about 80% are event personnel who work at arenas on game days” (RBC Company). Overall, even though the NBA has a large number of employees, a vast majority of these workers are involved in the direct logistics and operations of live events and games, rather than in administrative, coaching, or player-related roles. Next, revenue decreased during this time due to sponsorships being shifted in other directors to stay connected to consumers because sports were becoming less relevant due to the inability for teams to host their seasons, let alone get attendees. Broadcast networks were suffering from a lack of live sport events and hundreds of millions of dollars in advertising revenues have been lost (RBC Company). In total, the United States was estimated to face a $61.6 billion revenue drop. Breaking down specific leagues, to start off, the NCAA alone, it was projected that there would be a $2.5-4 billion loss in revenue that would normally be earned and distributed between college football conferences (Weston, 2020). The NCAA also planned to lose over $600 million from just canceling March Madness, the tournament between Division I Men’s and Women’s basketball teams, alone. This was a 50% decrease in revenue from the season before in 2019 (SI). The NBA had an estimated loss of $1-1.7 billion in ticket revenue, concession sales, media rights and merchandising and $695 million loss primarily from TV rights deals (Weston, 2020). The National Hockey League (NHL) was estimated to lose $1.3 million per game from ticketing, concessions, and advertising revenue (Weston, 2020). Finally, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics was reported to lose $15.3 billion and NBCUniversal, the Olympic media rights holder, was expected to lose around $1.2 billion in advertising (Weston, 2020). This is one major example of something unexpected that greatly impacted the whole world's economy. There can be smaller conflicts that can pop up to disrupt the sport’s industries and its economy

too. It can be as simple as inflation going up and some people deciding to cut out going to sports games that they would otherwise be attending because they have less disposable income. This would decrease the attendance at live events and if the projected number of attendance was incorrect, that event, team, sponsor, etc could potentially lose money. Going off of this, there are many specific audiences for each sport because some people only watch and are fully engaged with one specific season or league (Sports Media Inc.). Each season holds different sports, so the industry might decrease or increase depending on what season of sport it is. For example, the audience for football is huge, and once their season is over, the sports industry's revenue might decrease, even if there are highly anticipated fans for basketball season. It is also difficult to keep fans engaged between seasons of sports, for example transition from football to basketball season, or even until the next football season. This can affect all that comes with the sport's industry. Next, as I've stated, the sports industry is forever changing and evolving. These companies, teams, and leagues have to adapt to different changes and preferences of people, whether it be consumer interests, cultural trends, and generational preferences, organizations need to keep up with trends and their audience. Some examples could be a sudden change in fan engagement, technological advancements, or shifts in the way people consume sports media. The ability to keep up with emerging trends and anticipate the evolving desires of their audience is crucial for long-term success and relevance of these teams. As an example, streaming games has become very popular over the course of a couple years and teams ability to stay in contact with their fans through social media is critical with keeping a loyal fan base, especially with Gen-Z. Finally, another challenge that the sports industry faces is negative headlines and stories being the sole focus of some people instead of more positive or neutral stories. Many people are obsessed with negative attributes of people and issues in people's lives and only talk about those

aspects. Humans are naturally attracted to drama and conflict and reporters know this and that people will be drawn to learn about it, so they covered most negative things. When athletes become popular, people become more and more interested in more than just their career, but also their personal life. The media targets negative stories relating to their relationships, financials, legal issues and more. Well-known athletes are also held to higher standards and there's always eyes on them because they are seen as famous role models to the public. When anything happens to them, it blows up way more than it would a normal day to day person. There are many examples that I could choose from; let's focus on Tiger Woods and Colin Kaepernick. Eldrick Tont "Tiger" Woods is a professional American golfer who "was the top-ranked golfer in the world from August 1999 to September 2004 (264 consecutive weeks) and again from June 2005 to October 2010 (281 consecutive weeks)" (Encyclopædia Britannica). In 2009, Woods was linked with mistresses and admitted to "transgressions" in his private life. This had a huge impact on not only Woods' personal life, but also his very public professional life. The scandal led to many sponsors dropping Woods. Investors in the three sports-related companies – Tiger Woods PGA Tour Golf, Gatorade, and Nike – experienced a 4.3% scandal-generated drop in stock value, equivalent to about $6 billion (UC Davis). Another example is Colin Kaepernick, an American civil rights activist and former professional football quarterback who played for the San Francisco 49ers. Kaepernick "took a knee during the playing of "The Star Spangled Banner" in 2016 to bring attention to systemic oppressions — specifically police terrorism — against Black and Brown people. For his stance, he has been denied employment by the league to this day", as his website stated on its Mission page. Nike's relationship with Kaepernick began in 2011 after the 49ers drafted him. During this scandal season, the company did not know what to do with Kaepernick after he opted out of his contract with the 49ers in the Spring of 2017. He

stayed on Nike's roster with a contract that was set to expire in early 2019, but his image still did not appear on any Nike advertisements, and his name was not on any apparel. For the 30th anniversary, Nike pushed to use Colin Kaepernick as the face of the Just Do It campaign (New York Times). Although Kaepernick's outcome was positive in terms of scholarship deals and continue to campaign around what he believes in, there were many negative things said about Kaepernick. Furthermore, the issue is that people focus on the negative aspects of someone rather than their successful career or highlights. Although this is part of being an athlete, it takes away from the positive entertainment of watching sports.

Lastly, I would like to focus on the future direction of the sports industry. The ideas of globalization and internationalization have been touched on, but this is a key part of the future. If sports continue to expand globally, it will introduce great opportunities and a bigger sense of community. Technology and media are a huge part of the expansion of community and engagement of the sport industry and allows people to be connected from anywhere in the world and share a common love of a particular sport, team, or athlete. Sports leagues can also travel to each other in different countries to play internationally, which would not only expand their experience, but also at the same time will expand fan bases globally. The expansion of cultures would continue and sports would be filled with even larger groups with different cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds. This would help break down social barriers and provide a better understanding of and appreciation for each other all over the world. Sports will continue to grow and become popular in other places in countries and the world. For example, some sports are not played in every state in the United States and by expanding, it would provide more opportunities for people in those areas to start playing those sports or watching them. This would increase the talent pool for leagues and teams to choose from and overall would make sports more

competitive and stronger. The economic opportunities would be crazy. The amount of support from the fans would increase merchandise, travel, ticket sales and more and sponsorships would be bigger than over, spreading and supporting teams and athletes from all around the world. Electronic sports, or E-sports, have become immensely popular in the last couple of decades. This has become its own industry and created a new world for the sports world, attracting millions of fans, huge financial investments, and widespread media attention. The growth of E-sports has created a new ball game with its own tournaments, sponsorships, media rights, and fan culture. Just like any other sport, it has generated a huge fan base and large following. In 2022, NewZoo announced that the global esports audience reached 532 million people and it will create a revenue of $1.38 billion. “Revenues from brand partnerships are the foundation on which the esports market was built, so it’s no surprise that sponsorship continues to be esports’ highest-grossing revenue stream, generating $837.3 million in 2022 and accounting for nearly 60% of the entire market” (Weston, 2020). Brands and sponsors have been a big part of how rapid this industry is growing. Red Bull, Mercedes-Benz, Sephora, Coca-Cola, and more are main companies that have invested in Esports (SI). Adidas was also an official sponsor of the Inaugural 2024 Esports World Cup (EWC). This huge, global event took place in Saudi Arabia and featured tournaments for 22 titles across PC, console and mobile devices (NewZoo). There were a total of 27 sponsors for this event and not all of them were Esports related. For example, Adidas was the “EWC’s official merchandise partner and all players, staff and crew will receive premium kits from the brand” (NewZoo). Warner Bros. Discovery agreed to air the event and leaned on Eurosport and CNN brands to elevate the coverage of the EWC (NewZoo). To go off this, there are many streaming platforms, like Youtube Gaming and Twitch, to expand to inside fan’s homes to watch these gaming experiences. As E-sports continues to grow and develop, it

will likely continue to blur the lines between traditional sports and digital gaming, creating new opportunities for players, teams, and fans to connect. The sport industry has been giving into sustainability. There have been eco-friendly stadiums being built, energy efficient lighting being used (LEDs), using more renewable energy to reduce the use of fossil fuels - installing solar panels that can generate clean energy, reducing carbon emissions by promoting green transportation alternatives, and more (VentureBeat). The 2024 Super Bowl host, Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas, ran the event entirely off of renewable energy, which was the first to be done in NFL history (Time). AFC Ajax, a soccer club's stadium, the Johan Cruyff Arena in Amsterdam, has more than 4,200 solar panels, a wind turbine, and a giant stadium battery to keep it powered (Time). The Mercedes-Benz Stadium reduces electricity consumption by 29% and fans are offered a free bicycle valet service on game days (TEN). TIME explains that "the most obvious way to reduce emissions associated with construction is to avoid building new stadiums altogether," but "one potential solution is to adjust how tournaments are structured to reduce flight times as much as possible" (TEN) The future direction of the sports industry will be driven by technological advancements, evolving fan preferences, and a growing focus on sustainability and inclusivity.

Understanding background information about the sports industry directly relates to my empirical chapter for many reasons. Firstly, the sports industry's economic structure, including sponsorships, broadcasting rights, and merchandise sales, influences how teams build their brand and market towards their fans. Within the last section, I discussed what makes up the sports industry's revenue – ticket sales, merchandise, sponsorships, and media rights, and more. By understanding the financial side of the industry, one can analyze how the Steelers, Packers, and Panthers employ marketing strategies to maximize these revenue streams and grow their brand

visibility. Visibility is directly related to fan engagement which is why different teams market towards different demographics and groups. Teams focus on building long-term relationships with fans through loyalty programs, social media, fan events, and content marketing. This is especially important because sports teams depend heavily on the passion and loyalty of their fanbase to drive ticket sales, merchandise, and media consumption. The sports industry analysis also looks at the competitive landscape of sports teams within a particular league, division, or even across different sports. Teams must build a strong brand identity to differentiate themselves in a highly competitive environment. Understanding how teams like the Steelers, Packers, and Panthers fit into this competitive environment allows for a deeper analysis of their marketing strategies.

The Sports Industry is such a large, successful industry that encompasses so much, so there is a lot to cover. Below, on the following page, are some key takeaways to condense and summarize the most important ideas and data from the previous section to allow for the reader to familiarize themselves with the most relevant information relating to this senior project.

Key Takeaways of the Sports Industry:

1. The Sports Industry is a rapidly growing global industry encompassing professional, college, esports, amateur, and recreational sports. It thrives on fan engagement, globalization, and innovation. Its future success depends on adaptability, sustainability, and tech integration. As of 2023, the global market reached a value of $484.9 billion and it is expected to grow to $651 billion in 2028.

2. It includes diverse revenue streams: entertainment, media (worth $110 billion), sponsorships ($600 million in Super Bowl ad revenue in 2023), merchandise, technology, and tourism ($91.8 billion spent in the US in 2023).

3. Teams must leverage marketing, sponsorships, and digital platforms to build loyalty, engagement, and revenue. They must adapt to trends to keep up with the market and be the most successful.

4. Some challenges the industry has faced include: economic risks & uncertainty (COVID-19 losses ($61.6 billion in 2020 and inflation impacts, reputation management (scandals affecting sponsorships and brand image), and audience interest (seasonal shifts in fan interest).

The National Football League

This section goes into much detail specifically relating to the National Football League: its history, history of the Super Bowl and revenue statistics surrounding it, how the NFL's revenue is split up. This section directly relates to my research and the questions because I dive into the specifics of the NFL and individual teams that are in the league. Learning more about the NFL as a whole allows readers to understand the growth, expansion, and success behind the brand, business and league overall. As many aspects of the league have shifted, the brand has had to shift to keep up with trends, more specifically in marketing, which is what my project focuses on. Everything about the league revolves around marketing and as generations shift, new marketing strategies and trends emerge that the teams use to continue their engagement and revenue success; this relates to my first research question. Since the NFL has been around since 1920, the framework of success of teams skill wise, brand wise, and revenue wise has been established for a while, which is why I wanted to look into my second research question.

The National Football League (NFL) is not only one of the most popular sports leagues in the world, but also has come to be a major brand. Over the years, they have implemented many marketing strategies to engage fans, boost attendance, and enhance their brand image, which will be the central focus of this project and research.

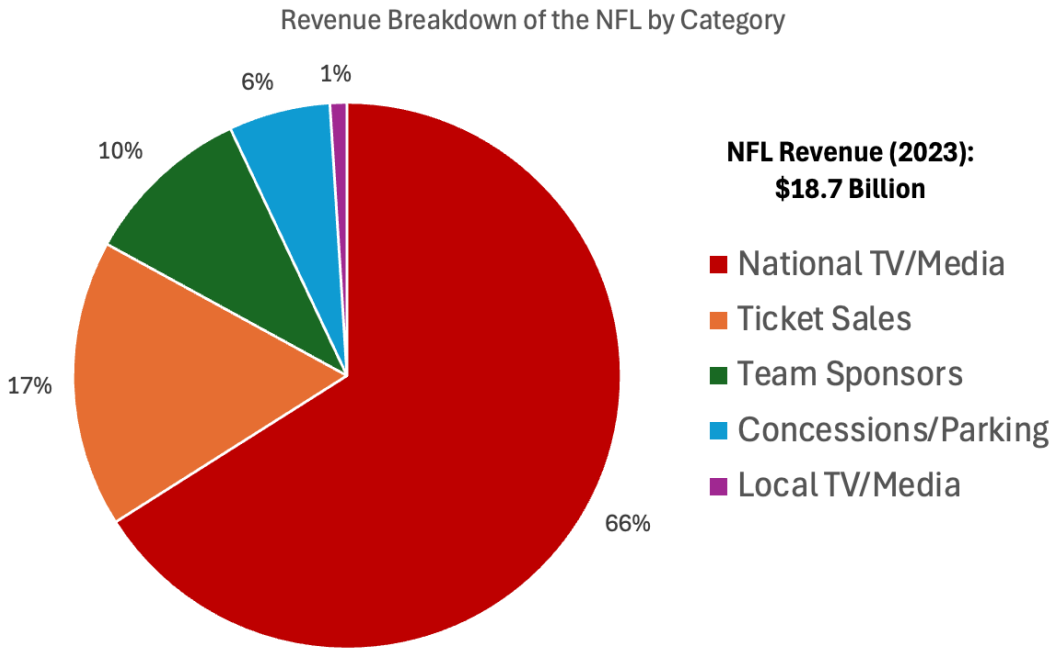
Furthermore, the NFL is the highest professional football league in North America, founded in September of 1920 in Canton, Ohio by Jim Thorpe (Encyclopædia Britannica). There are 32 teams divided between two conferences: the American Football Conference (AFC) and the National Football Conference (NFC), which are split up into four divisions (North, South, East and West) containing four teams apiece (NBC Insider). The regular season is typically 18

weeks, each team playing 17 games with an off week called a “bye week”. During this, each team in the divisions play each other twice, one home and one away game (NFL). After the regular season, the top 7 teams from each conference, 14 total, go into a single elimination tournament leading up to the championship game called the “Super Bowl”, where the winner of each conference plays each other.

The Super Bowl started in 1966 after the merger between the two conferences, the AFL and NFL, to decide the best team (Encyclopædia Britannica). It was originally called the AFL-NFL World Championship Game, but changed its name to “Super Bowl” with the use of roman numerals to designate the individual games in 1969 (CBS Sports). The Super Bowl is now played on a Sunday and has become an unofficial American Holiday called “Super Bowl Sunday” (NFL). It is one of the most-watched sporting events in the world. In 2024, 123.4 million people watched the Super Bowl at home from their TV, which is record high (Yellowbrick) and 61,629 people attended the game in person, which is pretty average because of stadium sizes (ENGIE Resources). Not only this, but over the years, the NFL has become the largest and popular league in the world, but on top of that, a highly successful brand. To demonstrate this, the revenue of all the NFL teams totaled to the highest number to date, at 20.24 billion dollars (Statista) and their sponsorships also hit a high of 1.88 billion dollars in 2023 (Statista) with 37 sponsors (Sports Business Journal), but is now up to 42 sponsorships for the 2024-2025 season (Sports Business Journal). The NFL’s 32 teams generated an estimated $2.35 billion in sponsorship revenue this season, according to a new report from sponsor tracking platform SponsorUnited. The total is up 15% over the prior year and more than 50% ahead of the NBA and MLB (Sportico).

Diving into specifics, the NFL's revenue is split up into two categories: national revenue and local revenue. National revenue is merchandising and licensing and TV deals that are split up amongst all 32 teams. Local revenue is individual to each team and consists of ticket sales, concessions, and local sponsors. Like the Sports Industry as a whole, the revenue stream comes from TV and streaming deals, merchandising and licensing deals, ticket sales and concessions, and sponsorships. Below is a breakdown of the revenue streams of the NFL, noting that National TV/Media is the highest at around twelve billion dollars.

Figure 5: Revenue Breakdown of the National Football League by Category



Source: Statista Market Insights (2025)

Firstly, football games are played and constantly streamed on Mondays, Thursdays and Sundays, so media companies have to pay a lot in order to broadcast all of the games. In 2021, the NFL extended their contracts with Amazon, CBS, ESPN/ABC, FOX, and NBC for the

distribution of its games over television, digital platforms, and additional media rights (NFL). This agreement started in 2023 and will run through 2033, while expanding the audiences of both sides through their services. As for merchandising and licensing deals, the NFL partners with NFL Properties LLC and NFL International LLC, who have licensing for both the league and its individual teams (Statista). The one that everyone normally thinks about is ticket sales and concessions costs. These costs and revenues are typically the same as a stadium can only hold so many people. On average, they can hold 70,000 people (Statista) and the average cost for a ticket to a game costs around $120 (Statista). This equates to 8.4 million dollars in revenue just from selling tickets. Concessions don't bring in much for the teams, but they are still bringing in something. Sitting at 42 now, the NFL has had a steady increase in sponsorships throughout the last several years, and it can only be expected that teams and the league itself will continue to grow in this department. Naming rights are one of the biggest sponsorships the NFL can receive. "In January 2024, for example, Levi Strauss & Co. and the San Francisco 49ers announced a $170 million deal to keep the jeans' maker's name on the team's stadium through the 2043 NFL season" (Statista).

To also showcase its success and popularity, as a whole, the NFL is one of the most widely televised sporting leagues in the world. In 2023, the average television viewership of a regular season NFL game was 17.9 million (Statista). The total attendance at NFL games reached a record 18.85 million fans across the regular season in 2023 (Statista). The average regular-season home game attendance in the National Football League (NFL) during the 2022-23 season stood at almost 70 thousand fans, which is the highest attended professional sports league in North America (Statista). These numbers show that the NFL has a huge following and audience.

Governance of the National Football League: Interview with Issac Gittens '14

To dive deeper into the governance of the National Football League (NFL), I was able to interview the Senior Manager of Football Business Operations & Strategy at the National Football League, Issac Gittens. I was recommended by Professor Onyeuwu to reach out to Mr. Gittens because he is an Allegheny alumni who graduated in 2014. I was able to connect with Mr. Gittens on LinkedIn and acquired his email address. I reached out and we discussed a little about my senior project, the research I was doing, and then scheduled the online interview through Zoom. My interview with Mr. Gittens was held on February 19, 2025 and it was recorded.

Below are the questions that were asked during the interview:

1. What does your position at the NFL entail? What is your role specifically?
2. What does the NFL, as an organization, do?
3. I know there are 32 teams in the NFL, what is the relationship between the NFL and these teams? What does the NFL do to help support all teams?
4. Would you say the teams hold an oligopolistic market?
5. Can you walk us through the ownership structure of the NFL? How do team owners play a role in the league's decision-making?
6. What are the main strategies you employ in football business operations to maximize both revenue and fan engagement across the league?
7. How does the NFL prioritize innovation in fan experiences, both in-stadium and through digital channels? Media partnerships and social media specifically

8. How is the NFL approaching the globalization of the sport? What role do you see international markets playing in the league's future growth?
9. Any other information you think might be relevant to my comp? Any brochure, web sites or other documents you can share that will give me additional information on the NFL?

Mr. Gittens explained that the NFL is a Sports Media Company that is a “sports media empire” (I. Gittens, Zoom interview, February 19, 2025). The company does everything revolving around football and is also a media platform for game play, social media, and celebrity flag football. The NFL sells and markets nationally. Mr. Gittens explained that Football Operations has many departments, 7 to be exact. His role specifically is Business Operations. He focuses on football development and exposure – how the NFL is growing the game, how they market through football exposure, how players, refs, coaches, etc are introduced into the program to make sure they transition well. He also makes sure finances are right, works with their budget, allocated the budget for goals and priorities, and more.

The teams and the NFL were described to all work together to advance the overall football specific goal of the league of spreading the love and play of football, establish rules, regulations, vote on different changes and all work together with finances. The NFL allows for the league to produce revenue and sponsorships nationally. There is a primary owner of every club that is in charge of its major and minor stakeholders. Each team has their specific structure of their ownership and leadership,

Next, we discussed how the NFL prioritizes innovation in their fan’s experiences. They take on an innovation standpoint and use broadcast as their main strategy, through Amazon for

example. In the stadium, they make sure there are a lot of elements that grab fan's attention. The jumbotron and in house entertainment are a couple examples Mr. Gittens expanded on.

Football has become a worldwide sport and teams are beginning to expand and play outside of the United States. By expanding and playing in new countries, this allows the NFL to expand their markets and expose their brand. They used to host two games a year outside the U.S., last year it was around 5, and more recently it's now around 7 games. Mr. Gittens explained that they always go to London, England and teams have been going to Brazil and Germany, for other examples. This is important because it allows their global market to witness a game in person and what it's like.

Flag football is a non-contact version of football that is played with flags instead of someone being tackled. It has been a huge driver for growth as it "puts the game of football onto a stage that all the world can see and people can see their countries compete" (I. Gittens, Zoom interview, February 19, 2025). The NFL has been working closely with the International Federation of American Football (IFAF), the "governing body of American football internationally" (I. Gittens, Zoom interview, February 19, 2025), which helps start flag football programs. They started international pathway programs a few years ago that allow people who are playing other sports to try football. There are two NFL academies in London, England that opened in 2019 and one recently opened in Australia this past year. These academies are football hubs that show and teach the game of football. There have been expansions of international teams and international sponsorship teams.

Understanding the structure of the National Football League as a whole allows readers to dive into specifics about each team. It plays a critical role in shaping the strategies and operations of each individual team too. The structure of the NFL lays down the foundation for

discussing how the team has leveraged its status, traditions, and compliance with league rules to become one of the most successful and recognized franchises in the NFL. It's also critical to analyze the specific strategies and operations of each individual team. The NFL's governance system, which includes rules about player contracts, salary caps, revenue sharing, and scheduling, provides the framework within which all teams must operate. This structure not only affects the day-to-day operations but also influences long-term strategic decisions, as teams must comply with the league's policies while maximizing their performance on the field and profitability off of it.

As done following the Sports Industry section, below on the next page will be key takeaways from the previous section about the National Football League. This is done to compile the most important information discussed within the previous section to allow readers to remember the most important information that is most relevant to this senior project**.**

Key Takeaways of the NFL and Teams:

1. The first section provides in-depth detail and analysis of the National Football League pertaining to its history, structure, revenue streams, governance, and marketing strategies.
    a. The NFL is a professional American football league that was founded in 1920. It is made up of 32 teams within two conferences – the American Football Conference (AFC) and the National Football Conference (NFC). The regular season is typically 18 weeks and ends with the championship game of the Super Bowl. The Super Bowl is one of the most watched sporting events in the world – 123.4 million people watched the Super Bowl at home in 2024.

b. The revenue of all the NFL teams totaled to the highest number to date, at 20.24 billion dollars and their sponsorships also hit a high of 1.88 billion dollars in 2023.
    i. Its revenue is broken down into national revenue – merchandising and licensing and TV deal – and local revenue – individual to each team and consists of ticket sales, concessions, and local sponsors. The revenue stream comes from TV and streaming deals, merchandising and licensing deals, ticket sales and concessions, and sponsorships.
c. The teams and the NFL were described to all work together to advance the overall football specific goal of the league of spreading the love and play of football, establish rules, regulations, vote on different changes and all work together with finances.
d. The NFL has expanded to play globally – England, Germany, and Brazil – and the expansion of flag football has begun.

Next, history and facts pertaining to the three case studies that were evaluated during this senior project will be discussed.

Pittsburgh Steelers

The Pittsburgh Steelers play at Acrisure Stadium in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and were founded in 1933. The Steelers play in the AFC (American Football Conference) North. They were first founded as the “Pittsburgh Pirates” by Arthur J. Rooney in 1933 before officially becoming the “Pittsburgh Steerlers” in 1940. They are currently owned by the Rooney Family.

They have participated in ninety-two seasons and hold six Super Bowl Champion titles. Their first Super Bowl title was acquired in 1975, Super Bowl IX, when the Steelers beat the Minnesota Vikings (Steelers, 2022). Since, they have come out to win 5 other Super Bowls. Their best decade was in the 1970s under Head Coach Chuck Noll. They made the playoffs eight times and won four Super Bowls (NFL Football Operations). After that, the Steelers became one of the most successful franchises and the first NFL team to win six Super Bowls when they won the 2006 and 2009 Super Bowls, after drafting quarterback Ben Roethlisberger (NFL Football Operations).

As stated, Art Rooney founded the Steelers in 1933 and owned the team up until his death in 1988 (Pro Football Hall of Fame). Art's oldest son, Dan Rooney, took over as the Steelers president in 1975 and when Art passed away, he passed the Steelers down to his five sons, giving each 18% of the franchise (ESPN). The extra 10% was owned by the McGinley Family back then (ESPN). In 2008, the Rooney family wanted to structure the ownership of the Steelers, giving each son 16% ownership and 20% to the McGinley Family, but this went against the NFL rule, so they had to restructure the ownership (SportsKeeda). Dan and Art II mandated the 30% NFL stake, Timothy & Patrick sold their shares, Art Jr. reduced his shares to 6%, the McGinley family reduced to 10%, and brought on three partners, Pilot Corporation, Legendary Pictures and Paul Family of Pittsburgh, who each got 16% (SportsKeeda). Since then, the Steelers have added a handful of new investors to their shares. Desk (2024) shares that "the Rooneys are praised for their consistent and patient leadership style, which has contributed considerably to the team's stability and success. This strategy is evidenced by the Steelers' hiring of only three head coaches since 1969, the fewest among NFL teams during that time span."

Today, Arthur J. Rooney II is the President and his son, Arthur J. Rooney Jr. is Vice President (Steelers).

Green Bay Packers

The Green Bay Packers play on Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wisconsin and the team was founded in 1919. They play in the NFC (National Football Conference) North conference. The Packers explain that the first meeting of the team's founding took place in the old Green Bay Press-Gazette building and there was no documentation of who actually was there. The following day, it was announced that the Indian Packing Co. would sponsor the team and referred to it for the first time as the "Packers." Following that, Curly Lambeau was elected captain of the team, and George Whitney Calhoun was named manager (Packers). Then, they joined the NFL in 1921, and in 1929, they signed three key players that took them to three straight NFL Championships: “They won their first three by league standing (1929, 1930 and 1931), and 10 since the NFL's playoff system was established in 1933 (1936, 1939, 1944, 1961, 1962, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1996 and 2010),” (Packers). All in all, the Packers have won 13 NFL Championships, which is more than any other team.

The Green Bay Packers have been a publicly owned, nonprofit corporation since 1923. They were first organized as the Green Bay Football Corp., and then in 1935 it was switched to Green Bay Packers, Inc. In all, out of the 5,204,625 shares owned by 538,967 stockholders, none of them receive any dividend on the initial investment. The extra profits go directly back into their organization “to support our football operations and keep Lambeau Field as a top-ranked venue for our fans,” as President and CEO of The Packers, Mark Murphy stated (Packers). Majority of these shareholders are their own fans. “Fans have supported the team financially on

several occasions, including six stock sales: 1923, 1935, 1950, 1997, 2011, and 2022" (Packers). The league is governed by a board of directors and a seven-member executive committee. The shareholders meet once a year and get to vote on the Board of Directors.

Carolina Panthers

The Carolina Panthers play at the Bank of America Stadium in Charlotte, North Carolina. They are in the NFC South and in October of 1993, the NFL owners selected the Carolinas to be the 29th NFL franchise and the first expansion team since 1976 (RetroSeasons). The Panthers were founded in 1993 after starting the process to become a team in 1987. Jerry Richardson was the founder from the start and up until 2018, when it was sold to David Tepper (RetroSeasons). The Panthers made their first Super Bowl entrance in 2003 when they won the NFC championship. Since then, they appeared in Super Bowl 50 in 2015, losing to the Denver Broncos (RetroSeasons). The Panthers are a part of Fanatics, Inc, which is a global digital sports platform that sells licensed sports apparel and collectibles.

Fanatics, Inc.

To continue, Fanatics, Inc. sells sports licensed apparel and partners with 28 of the 32 NFL teams in the league as well as teams for the Major Soccer League (MLS). This company is an important part of my discussion because the Carolina Panthers partner directly with them for their merchandise, unlike the Pittsburgh Steelers and Green Bay Packers, as it's important to note that Fanatics is the biggest competitor for them. Fanatics is founded and owned by Michael Rubin. The following information was gathered from the Fanatics, Inc. website under "Our History":

Rubin signed his first e-commerce deal with NASCAR back in 2002. He acquired Fanatics, which was based out of Florida that had presence across college and professional sports teams. All e-commerce rights in North America were owned by GSI, so Rubin took over GSI too to take over the e-commerce business in 2011, but that same year, he sold GSI to eBay for $2.4 billion. His plan was "to create an entirely differentiated, real-time licensed sports merchandise experience for global fans and partners… An emphasis was immediately placed on real-time manufacturing, data, and technology…" Today, Fanatics says their "business has transformed from a domestic e-commerce company, selling mostly third-party merchandise, into a mobile-first, direct-to-consumer global brand with its own manufacturing capabilities to serve the growing real-time expectations of fans worldwide." To continue its success, it has expanded into Fanatics Collectibles and Fanatics Betting & Gaming in 2021. Fanatics Collectibles is a leading licensor, producer, designer, and seller of physical and digital trading cards, sports memorabilia, and other digital assets for entertainment and sports properties globally, as well as a manufacturer of physical and digital trading cards (launching Fanatics Live in 2023, allowing live shopping). Fanatics Betting & Gaming is building an online and retail sports betting and online casino real-money wagering platform. All three of these businesses formed "Fanatics Holdings, Inc." and they are today still run by Michael Rubin. There are currently over 22,000 global employees working across more than 80 offices and locations and they serve more than 100 million fans and over 900 leading sports properties.

Fanatics, Inc. is a company that works with others to perform outsourcing marketing. The following information comes from an article by Somjai (2017). Overall, the author explains that due to globalization, companies don't produce everything on their own and outsourcing has become one of the best ways to allow these companies "to focus on what they do best and

outsourcing what others can do better, faster, cheaper, and higher quality". The author discusses many advantages and disadvantages of outsource marketing and this is very relevant to my senior comprehensive project as one of the NFL teams in my case study – the Carolina Panthers, uses outsource marketing for their team's merchandise, which differs from what the Pittsburgh Steelers and Green Bay Packers do. To dive into some advantages that come from outsource marketing are expertise and fast delivery, the ability to concentrate on core processes rather than the supporting ones, risk-sharing and cost reductions in operating cost, and recruitment cost. Somjai (2017) explains that the most important factor of the advantages of outsourcing is expertise and fast delivery. Outsourcing is done by people in the specific field, so the company has the specific equipment and technical expertise that is typically much better than the ones at the original organization. Overall, this leads to tasks being completed faster, more effectively, have better quality and have prompt delivery. Second is the ability to concentrate on core processes rather than the supporting ones. Outsourcing gives the organization more time to focus on its business goals, process, and job assignments. Risk sharing is the third and is "the most crucial factor in determining the outcome of a campaign" (Somjai, 2017). This helps the organization shift certain responsibilities to the outsourced partner. Finally, outsourcing reduces costs related to set up, operations, and recruitment. To explain more, it reduces the need to hire individuals in-house, which the costs of recruitment and operational costs are greatly minimized. On the other hand, there are many disadvantages to outsource marketing that need to be addressed as well – risk of exposing confidential data and technology, synchronizing the deliverables, having many hidden costs, and lack of customer focus. When a company outsources, it involves the risk of exposing confidential information and using technology through a third party. Secondly, the article addresses that if someone were to choose the wrong

partner for outsourcing, some common problems include stretched delivery time frames, substandard quality output, defects, and inappropriate categorization of responsibilities (Somjai, 2017). Third, outsourcing includes many hidden costs. While the concept is cost-effective, there are also costs involved with signing contracts (specifically internationally) creates a large problem and cost. Finally, the outsourcing partner could have to work with many other companies/organizations at a time. This can lead to a lack of a complete focus on the original company's tasks and job assignment (Somjai, 2017). As you can see, the discussion of outsource marketing and its advantages and disadvantages are critical for my project. For the Carolina Panthers, outsourcing might allow them to save money, focus their brand on other projects instead of focusing on selling merchandise while allowing their outsource partner to specialize in marketing merchandise most effectively. They do risk loss of control or inconsistent messaging for their brand.

Chapter 4: Empirical Analysis

My hypothesis states that digital marketing is the main form of marketing used by these National Football League teams compared to typical traditional marketing strategies. Next, it is hypothesized that the Steelers and Packers will use similar marketing strategies and it will defer a little for the Panthers. It is hypothesized that wins and losses are the biggest factor in being a top team in the NFL and these greatly impact marketing for a team. If a team is doing very well, they will have a stronger and larger fan presence and engagement. With this, NFL teams with strong marketing campaigns are more likely to see higher attendance and better social media engagement. Teams with active social media presence and fan interaction often see stronger ticket sales and a wider reach in merchandise sales. To test these hypotheses, I interviewed the Head of Merchandise in three NFL teams: the Pittsburgh Steelers, the Green Bay Packers, and the Carolina Panthers to gather real company information about the effectiveness of sports marketing strategies.

For my empirical chapter, I will be discussing the case studies of the Pittsburgh Steelers, the Green Bay Packers, and the Carolina Panthers. For these, I interviewed the Vice President of Merchandising and Digital Commerce at the Steelers, John Wolfe, the Director of Retail at the Packers, Chrysta Jorgensen, and the Senior Director of Brand & Consumer Marketing, Dawn Turner. These interviews will address the research questions I brought up in the Introduction:

1. What marketing strategies does the National Football League use most frequently? Do the teams use different marketing strategies?
2. What makes a team a top player in the league? Wins and losses, their brand, or their marketing?

3. How much of an impact does marketing have on the National Football League and individual teams in the league?

Professor Chris Allison, my second reader, got me in contact with John Wolfe at the Pittsburgh Steelers and I was able to meet with him in his office in Pittsburgh on January 17, 2025, and I was able to record him. Mr. Wolfe put me in contact with his counterpart at the Green Bay Packers, Chrysta Jorgensen, and I was also able to record this interview on February 5, 2025. During my interview call through Zoom, Mrs. Jorgensen suggested I look into a team that works directly with Fanatics, Inc. because of how different they do merchandising. She put me in contact with Dawn Turner, who works with Tepper Sports & Entertainment that partners with the Carolina Panthers and I was able to Zoom call her the next day, February 6, 2025. This interview was not recorded, but I took down personal quotes about what Mrs. Turner said.

I found the interview processes very rewarding and really helped me work on my communication skills and confidence majorly. Each of the interviewees were so easy to talk to and hold conversation with. They were very insightful and knowledgeable, and it was a pleasure getting to discuss their positions and information with them.

The following is the list of questions I asked each of the interviewees:

1. What does your position entail?
2. What mechanisms do you use to promote your products? How do you measure this? Can you rank them from most to least importance?

3. Of ticket sales, television, merchandising, how would you rank those in terms of revenue? What are your other various revenue sources? If it's not proprietary, can you give me any percentages?
4. What drives visibility? What are the biggest drivers in revenue? Wins/losses?
5. How much say does the league have in fanatics?
6. What role does social media play in your merchandising and digital commerce strategies, like how do you tailor strategies to each platform? How do you leverage platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok to boost sales?
7. The sports retail landscape is very competitive, with various teams and leagues offering similar products. How do you ensure the Steelers stand out in that crowded marketplace?
8. The Steelers have several high-profile corporate sponsors like BudLight, Pepsi, and Nike. How valuable are these sponsorships to your marketing/merchandising strategy?
9. How do these different cause related wardrobe changes impact your business? Ex: Cancer, armed services, paint cleats for breast cancer.
10. Can you tell me about the high-profile corporate sponsors your team has? How valuable are these sponsorships to your marketing/merchandising strategy?
11. How do you market towards themed games and how does it impact your business?
12. Is there anyone else you could put me in contact with, even in a Zoom call?

John Wolfe with the Pittsburgh Steelers

First, I will begin with discussing my interview with John Wolfe. Mr. Wolfe is the Vice President of Merchandising and Digital Commerce at the Pittsburgh Steelers, which is he responsible for all of the merchandising business that is Steeler related product. Fanatics, Inc, the

official e-commerce partner for the NFL and MLS, does not work with the Steelers. The Steelers are owned by the Rooney Family, a small group that holds ownership of the NFL team. With this, the Steelers sell their merchandise through the "Steelers Pro Shop" and they actually do not make any money from anything sold on the official NFL website and shop. Mr. Wolfe explained that while the "NFL is one of our biggest competitors, we are also in business with them," (J. Wolfe, in person interview, January 17, 2025). He described his position as a retailer who sells exclusive products and has teams that are split up into the major merchandise categories that the Steelers sell. To explain better, there are individual teams that focus on the Terrible Towel, jerseys, women's apparel, shoes, a team that does digital commerce and has stores all over the United States, and so on. On the digital commerce side, he has a web developer who updates the website from the technical side, he has two graphic designers who create products and do photoshoots, and someone who merchandises the website based on the new things that come in and decides how it is presented. He has someone who manages all the marketing: they plan out the messages within the emails and send out all the blasts. There is also an analytics team who will determine where these email blasts go. His team will have a discussion with them to talk about their strategy and focal points, and where they are trying to take it and they figure out who it should be targeted towards. They have a big database of fans and their demographics, so they are able to send emails to direct groups for what is being sold or launched. While digital media campaigns are important, his office focuses on merchandising, and while they work with the social media department, they are very careful not to step on each other's toes. Note that everything above is related to the digital marketing that the Steelers promote.

Next, we discussed all the mechanisms that Mr. Wolfe and his teams use to promote Steelers merchandise. He said that a big part of what they do is email; it used to be the most

important aspect, but others are topping it. Paid search is a big thing they focus on (top two in importance), which is when they will work with a company who will allow the Steelers Pro Shops to pay for the number one spot when you look up something to do with the Steelers and their merchandise. They will also buy ads everywhere to drive the business. The merchandising department is very careful about not overstepping on the marketing and social media department and they focus on different marketing strategies. The Director of Digital Commerce, Stephanie Beck, leads the Digital Commerce Marketing Specialist, Bryant Bauer, who both work in conjunction with the Steelers Media Team. A main takeaway is that they do a lot of work with the social media team, but they aren't allowed to sell their product on third party sites. They do put products on social media platforms (Instagram and Facebook) and allow users to click a link that takes them to the website to purchase merchandise. Mr. Wolfe said social media posts don't drive a lot of revenue, but it drives the visibility of the brand. A big part of this is when people do an organic search (another top mechanism in importance) - when they will reorganize their website to the most relevant and update things their fans need access to. The Steelers have developed their brand very well and get a large amount of traffic on their website already, but with the emails, paid search, organic, and socials, it all adds up to drive overall business. They look at the data behind it weekly, do a recap every month with their analytics team, and they discuss the recap and trends of everyone's performance to make sure they improve for the next year. From above, the most successful and effective marketing strategies that the Steelers steer from the traditional marketing strategies and dive into the digital and online world of marketing. To bring up a little about traditional marketing techniques, the Steelers do very little through television marketing, the only television marketing the Steelers do is involved with preseason games. They will do some TV spots for the Steelers Pro Shop and call out their store and

website. Along with this, they do close to no newspaper advertising because everything has just turned digital. Mr. Wolfe said they did billboards in the past surrounding campaigns, but it isn't a product anymore because of how digital everything is now. The Steelers brand is also a huge marketing technique for them. They are Steelers fans all over the United States and they claim to be “everyone’s team”. As an important example to note, there are Steelers bars all over the United States and there are some even in Europe. The Steelers website includes a section where a map showcases all of the bars around the United States that are considered Steelers Bars and have Steelers merchandise within them too, like Terrible Towels. You can go to almost every single city and there is a Steelers bar. Dallas, Texas has one, but Pittsburgh doesn’t have a Dallas Cowboys bar, or any other bar that showcases a different NFL team other than the Steelers. This is because of their wide fan base and how large the Steelers brand has become. A lot of people have lived in Pittsburgh and moved away, yet continue to stay fans and loyal to the Steelers.

Diving deeper into the specifics of the Steelers email marketing, there is a theme for every NFL home game, which allows the Steelers to market around this theme to create its own marketing strategy. Most of the themes are organized by the league and they are given a list of themes that are happening in a given season and the NFL Shop also creates products that surround them. Some examples of these themes from the Steelers side are Home Opener, Cancer Awareness, Crucial Catch, Alumni Weekend, Color Rush, Solute to Service, Hall of Honor, Inspire Change, My Cause My Cleats, Thank You Fans, and more. The NFL manufactures the product, and the Steelers Pro Shop buys it and does a big marketing campaign around it. These marketing campaigns are ones that everyone in the organization builds around. The Steelers specifically do sub-themes too; for example, they have a huge Latino population that goes to games, so they had a group come to the Cowboys Steelers game last year and the theme of that

game surrounded them. This game in specific allows for turnover in tickets, allowing new fans to come in and shop, which helps the business overall by having different people come in and spend money because someone who is going to every game isn't going to buy something every game.

For Pittsburgh specifically, if the Steelers lose, there are other major teams that fans can shift their attention to, like the Penguins or the Pirates. In terms of merchandising, it takes focus away from the Steelers as a whole if another team is doing well or there is negativity surrounding the Steelers. Mr. Wolfe explained that is a very fluid thing and said it's all about the wins and losses. Wins and losses were described to be the biggest factor in revenue and visibility and explained that it is "such a different experience running a company that is so dependent on wins and losses" (J. Wolfe, in person interview, January 17, 2025). He further explained that there are things they can't control, like how specific players react on the field, which will then affect if people still want to buy their merchandise. Any little thing that happens that the department can't control impacts the business. It can impact that specific person, but sometimes it does impact the business as a whole because it impacts the team. Another note that was brought up was that a team is not going to win every single game, so it's about how a team loses. If you lose a close game, then it's okay. For them, the Steelers were 10-3 at one point in the 2024-2025 season and everything was great. They did eventually lose to the Cleveland Browns and everything was still good because they were still doing good in the league overall. But, then they lost 5 in a row, and at that point, everyone got upset. This is an example of how the fans mentally control the atmosphere and sales. Business depends on what is going on within the team and there are a lot of factors out there that companies have to weigh against to make sure that they're hitting the numbers they need to hit. For example, when the Steelers signed Russell Wilson in March 2024, business got really good because people wanted to buy his new jersey and were excited about it.

This last year, he wasn't on the contract anymore, and people didn't know where he was going to end up so they were more hesitant to buy his jersey because they didn't want to waste money. As another example pertaining to his quote, "when things are going great, it's unbelievable" (J. Wolfe, in person interview, January 17, 2025), is the Steelers Super Bowl success. They won Super Bowl XL in 2005, business was incredible and in 2008, they were the Super Bowl XLV winner. Because they had two wins close to each other, there was a lot less excitement because there was a lot of pent up demand from the prior Super Bowl win. Mr. Wolfe used another team, the Kansas City Chiefs, as another example to further explain. The Chiefs have won the Super Bowl 4 times total - 1940, 2020, 2023, and 2024 - and 3 within the last 5 years now. Their level of business is going down and manufacturers of products don't always want the team that won last year to win again because the level of business goes down.

In terms of revenue from the NFL and the Steelers individually too, Mr. Wolfe said that television revenue is enormous from streaking and it's ranked at number one. Ticket sales were said to be significant. Concessions and merchandise come at a pretty good amount, although they are smaller compared to everything else. Sponsorships are showcased everywhere in the stadium and many work with the Steelers very closely, so they are considered a big part of their revenue and visibility too. The Steelers specifically have many sponsors, from BudLight, Pepsi, Nike, and more. Sponsorship is determined by how much revenue they are bringing in and how much they negotiate for. Based on how many assets the Steelers have given different sponsorships, it is assumed that they paid more for them. The little aspects are still bringing in revenue, such as "FedEx Great Hall", "People's Gate", and "Heinz Gate". The Steelers have a Sponsorship Group whose responsibility is to grow that revenue. This happens throughout all the leagues, and if one league is more powerful than another, then sponsorships are going to be tied to that. If there is a

polarizing figure, sponsorships are very likely to follow what they are doing, positively or negatively. Tiger Woods, for example, was dropped by a lot of sponsors in 2009-2010 because his ordeal and drama had a negative impact on their business. If your team isn't winning, you won't get all the sponsorships. For Pittsburgh, if the Steelers weren't winning and the Pirates took off, people would put their money in the Pirates because people are more tied to them. They look and see where fans are looking and put their money into that. He pointed out that fans want excitement and hype because they want to know that their team can win, have the ability to, and can be a champion.

Fanatics is the retailer where the NFL Shop sells merchandise for all the teams. They do carry a lot that the Steelers carry, but not everything. The Pro Shop has a lot of exclusives: all the things they develop and design them. People love the unique stuff and they're going to buy it at the Pro Shop, where they can get it. The more people have to come to the Pro Shop to buy specific things, the more they want the stuff you specifically design, the bigger the business gets. Their whole goal with their merchandise is to "tell a story within their merch" (J. Wolfe, in person interview, January 17, 2025). For example, they launched eleven new towels this past year, including but not limited to the Women of Steel and Wedding collections. This allows more people to connect personally with their merchandise and use it outside of just Steelers games. With this, the Steelers have been working on creating merchandise that is more subtle and that you can "carry into other avenues of life, not just going to the game" (J. Wolfe, in person interview, January 17, 2025). To continue the creation of new merchandise and interesting launches, they have two creative people who are given ideas based on interest discussed by the department, and with this, come up with designs and figure out the best one. Mr. Wolfe said these people and department as a whole spend a lot of time on the creative side of the designing

merchandise and what they want a specific product to be and look like, to “keep providing something new, unique and different that somebody else doesn't have” (J. Wolfe, in person interview, January 17, 2025) and play off the excitement of different things and launches to grow their business. Continuing on with this idea, the Steelers typically launch a collection and theme with a specific product. For example, when they are going to launch a new jersey, they are going to make a theme around it, which allows for more appeal creation too. They are going to purposely make the drop a big deal and make it bigger than what it really needs to be because “how you market it and speak to it is what drives the business” (J. Wolfe, in person interview, January 17, 2025). Instead of focusing on the price of everything (relating to the Four P’s of Marketing as I discussed in my Background chapter) – although they do focus on the price around national holidays because people are price shopping – the Steelers “would rather give people something unique, different, and exclusive you can’t get anywhere else” (J. Wolfe, in person interview, January 17, 2025).

Secondly, the Steelers Pro Shop competes with the promotions the NFL Shop has. To do this, the department meets and uses a master calendar that is month by month to see what deals and promotions the website uses to always keep up with the NFL Shop. For example, some include 25% off Nike, Pro Shop Exclusives, $25 off $100, giveaways with and without a purchase, End of Season Clearance, clearances when liquidating old stuff, free gifts with a purchase, and overall are much more promotional around the holidays. NFL Shop & Fanatics have promotions going on 75% of the time during the season and the Steelers Pro Shop focuses on certain times during the year where they have promotions. Mr. Wolfe said that it is less expensive to give away a free gift than it is to take $25 off the whole website. They tend to focus on the free gifts of their merchandise on the side of a purchase because the NFL Shop can not do

that. Their aim is to create “unique things that are different” (J. Wolfe, in person interview, January 17, 2025). They launch holiday collections, which are normally the same designs every year. They said if things keep selling, they keep carrying. They do bring in new designs every year, like the Terrible Towels. Mr. Wolfe did share that they are dropping a collection for the 50th anniversary of the Terrible Towel this upcoming year. When launching new products, they do not launch everything at one, they spread it out so they get continued interest throughout the year. Their department is always hitting the fans with new gear. The Steelers Pro Shop tagline is “get it direct from the team” and really focus on making sure people know that when they shop through the Pro Shop, it benefits the Steelers.

Chrysta Jorgensen with the Green Bay Packers

The second interview I conducted was with the Director of Retail at the Green Bay Packers, Chrysta Jorgensen. She oversees all aspects pertaining to retail for the Packers, which is divided into ecommerce, their store, and their stadium. She has been in sports for almost twenty years and has worked with a multitude of other teams with different levels of ownership. As I mentioned before in the Background chapter, the Packers are fan owned. For more background, Mrs. Jorgensen explained that early in the Packers history, they were in need of funds to continue being a football team, so they brought out the opportunity for shareholders. Fans of the organization or football as a whole can purchase a certain amount of stock certifications, but they do not pay dividends. Their shareholders get introduced to a multitude of things. Firstly, every July, they can vote on the Packers Board of Directors. Next, they are offered exclusive products on their website. They have to use their stock certificates number to enter a gated site to be able

to purchase custom products for shareholders. Each year at this annual meeting, they also offer this exclusive product at the stadium. Although there is not one specific owner tied to the Packers, everyone takes a lot of pride in the organization and wants to better the league and brand for the future and for future generations. Like the Steelers, the Packers have a Pro Shop where they sell all of the merchandise and where they get direct revenue from. Their shop has their own social media department, who their merchandising department works very closely with. As for the breakdown of the merchandising department, she explained that she has five managers that report to her: store, ecommerce, buying, distribution, and operations managers. The Store Manager oversees any of the operations at the stadium and game day responsibilities. The E-commerce Manager is responsible for the website as a whole and the Buying Manager oversees all of the buying for ecommerce, stadium, and wholesale. The Distribution Manager oversees the receiving of new products and distribution to their store and ecommerce, and is also involved with packing products. Finally, the Operations Manager oversees hiring, scheduling, training of part time staff, the in and out bound of the call center for customer service for ecommerce, runs the store during season, and helps with the suite orders, called Premium Account Holders who own suits. These five people report to Mrs. Jorgensen herself and she oversees them all.

The Green Bay Packers use many mechanisms in order to promote their merchandise and products overall. Overall, the Packers use digital marketing over traditional marketing strategies – like direct mail, print advertisements, and telemarketing. Mrs. Jorgensen said that they used to send out Pro Shop catalogs, but for the amount of work, time and money that is put into them, they don't get a lot of traction from them. So many people use their phones, but she said they still get some people that request things by the mail. It was said that advertising is generally their

number one and has been a driving force for new customers. They have seen great success online through Google and Meta Ads and other clickable ads that are seen online. Social media has been a great outlet because its focus is people who have sought the Packers out specifically and like their content and continues to draw in new customers. The Packers Pro Shop has their own social media department for those social media accounts that are managed. For example, they share when the Packers are putting products out there and when they are going to feature a player. For social media, they use platforms like TikTok, X, and Instagram, and Facebook. They launched a Pro Shop account on TikTok a year ago because they wanted to reach a younger fan base on the platforms that they exist on already. She explained that TikTok is more effort because they have to be entertaining while selling products and giving out information all within being posted in shorter videos. They use Instagram Threads, post on Facebook to gear towards an older audience than Instagram, and X is simple and easy to use for them because they can create success with one off tweets with a simple line of information and they don't have to even have a photo or video to post, unlike the other platforms. Within all their social media platforms, they have monthly meetings to discuss what is working and successful and discuss what their fan demographics are in those spaces. Each of the platforms demand a different type of message based on who is seeing them. Emails were said to be great for keeping existing customers up to date, but not driving her customers, because they choose to sign up to keep up with the information being shared. Mrs. Jorgensen said that email and social media fall behind advertising, but are still very important mechanisms. All of these mechanisms are important so the Packers have great advertising across the board by using different strategies. The Packers have huge attraction towards the city and within businesses they own too. Lambeau Field, the athletic stadium in Wisconsin where the Packers play, and Green Bay are both very high

marketing mechanisms the Packers focus on. The city is very popular and a go to vacation spot, and the stadium specifically is a go to venue for many companies, and it is also a landmark for Green Bay. Mrs. Jorgensen said, “With the success we've had on the field over the last 30 years, we have built a really great fanbase that know they have the best Packers Products who know our flagship store is the best, it’s part of the experience of Lambeau Field” (C. Jorgensen, Zoom interview, February 5, 2025) and the draw of the team itself is one of the most important mechanisms, but it’s not one they have to specifically spend energy on. She further explains that over the years, they have built up their brand so that people know to come there, as they are a destination, and the brand is always looking to always gain more attraction. With both a popular city and venue on top of a strong fanbase, they have created great relationships that continue to be drawn to their team. They also have the Atrium, which is made up of several businesses owned and operated by the Packers, which include a restaurant, Hall of Fame, and the Pro Shop. A lot of their marketing is done to promote Lambeau Field itself and go gather brand attraction.

Visibility and drivers of the Packers and their brand as a whole is always driven by wins and losses, as it makes the biggest difference. On-field performance has a direct line to retail and success of the team. From her experience, this doesn’t change no matter where you are or what sport industry you are in. On-field performance has a very direct line to retail and the success that the brand has. She stated that “for some teams, success can also be relative to how that team is viewed in the community” (C. Jorgensen, Zoom interview, February 5, 2025). The Packers have a very large fan base that travels well and are very passionate. How on-field performance affects retail is different than how it affects other departments or how fast it could affect other departments. For the Packers, on-field performance might not affect ticket sales initially because they have a sold out season ticket base. You could see more tickets hitting the secondary market

instead, but this allows for more visibility because you have more fans that get to go to Lambeau Field. Long term poor performance is very likely to affect all of the departments. Even though this is the case, teams still have to be creative and different and specifically tailored for each fan. As I mentioned above, Green Bay itself is a destination and the Packers have put themselves out there to draw in tourists. Because of all the city has to offer – Lambeau Field, Hall of Fame, Atrium, Restaurants, Titletown – they bring in much revenue and visibility through this. Mrs. Jorgenson focuses on the idea that Green Bay is a destination and this builds on their success. Their campus is meant to draw tourists to Green Bay and locals to come out and partake in all they offer. Although the Green Bay Packers have a lot aiding them in terms of visibility and revenue success, marketing is still a very important aspect because they still have to get products out to fans. Mrs. Jorgensen stated that e-commerce has most of the merchandises department's interest. She explains that, "if a product is not in a fan's face, then the fan won't find you," (C. Jorgensen, Zoom interview, February 5, 2025). The way they find you also needs to be easy and accessible or they're going to go to a competitor. Businesses want fans to find their website, and the Packers use search engine optimization to optimize their visitation and views on their website and to become the top related search when looking up something related to the Packers. Overall, digital marketing and e-commerce are a big deal for the Packers because they want fans to find their Pro Shop, which relies a lot on having good search engine optimization. As a whole, the NFL Shop does not give any money to the Packers because they are not a part of Fanatics, Inc. The NFL Shop will always be the Packers Pro Shops biggest competitor. In season, Packers fans are more likely to be price shopping – when one compares prices to find the best deals – because they are looking for something specific related to a team. To stay on top of the market, the Packers look at the NFL Shop's promotions and try to give a better deal than they are. Mrs.

Jorgensen noted that they found success in doing promotions with gifts with purchases, like Mr. Wolfe said about the Steelers as well. Last year, they took a different stance on how they put together promotions, understood that competitors might use discounts, but even then, they feel like their inventory is more accessible because the Packers pride themselves on showcasing merchandise for only one team as the NFL shops have 28 teams they partner with and sell for. But, being a part of the National Football League comes with positives as well. As a while, it elevates all 32 brands and each of them get visibility. While they might be a competitor in shopping and products, they might not be competitive in all departments. They are both buying the same things, which means those products can be made in bulk and they could end up getting a better price on it because the buying power of owning 32 team's logos is the best.

One key thing the Packers do that really sets them apart from the NFL Shop is that they have so much exclusive merchandise that is not sold anywhere else except for their Packers Pro Shop. Mrs. Jorgensen specifically said that they love selling exclusive and custom merchandise because that's what sets them apart from other competitors and teams. They are shown a catalog for what all the teams are selling, and the Packers look to tweak it with new, unique ideas they have. As an example, they launched their "cheese head", because their fan base is called this and this name has been commonly used for Green Bay residents. This merchandise piece was brought to life because the Packers acquired the business and are now owners of the Cheesehead brand. On their Pro Shop website, the merchandise surrounding this is an actual Cheesehead and a large range of items from apparel (t-shirts, socks, jewelry, etc), to household tools (wine stopper, towels, charcuterie boards, etc), to even rubber ducks, inflatables, can coolers, and so much more. Drops like this can really help the Packers brand as a whole because people continue to come back to their website because all of these items are only sold on their website and you

can't get it anywhere else. They also have dropped customizable sweatshirts with your name on the back too. All of these items are something fans cannot get anywhere else.

Continuing on the line of competitors for the Packers Pro Shop, a way for the merchandising department to ensure that they stand out in the marketplace is to create products no one else is carrying. Mrs. Jorgensen gave me multiple examples of different collaborations the Packers Pro Shop has done with other companies over the last couple of years. Firstly, they worked with Lululemon, but couldn't do it with Packers marks because they have to utilize NFL licensees. They worked with Lululemon to make a Lambeau Field collection with the name and year it was built (1957) on them. Next, Packers Branded has done collections with companies as well. In 2022, they partnered with Duluth Trading Company where it was sold on their Pro Shop, the NFL shop, and Duluth's website. This was a great opportunity to give them a chance to be different in the marketplace in general, while highlighting a brand that is in the state of Wisconsin. Mrs. Jorgensen said this collaboration was a very successful run for them. Finally, they also have worked with more exclusive NFL licenses like "47" or "Mitchell and Ness" to create a custom capsule of the product. An example of this was last year when they marketed around the launch of their white helmet and included more products, apparel, and gear to sell fans got to wear this gear at their "Winter Warning" game during the season.

Along with the idea of "Winter Warning" being a themed game, the Packers also follow the schedule of the NFL where they have themes for almost every home game for the season, just like the Steelers and everyone else in the league. "Winter Warning", along with "Packers vs. Cancer Game", normally called "Crucial Catch", and another called "Solute to Service", are a couple themed games where they do additional promotion. The Packers Community Outreach Team and Marketing departments create more promotion around some themed games, for

example more than what a typical NFL team might do. For example, they have the different theme of “Winter Warning”. Next, their typical “Crucial Catch” themed game is also their “Packers vs. Cancer Game” which raises awareness for cancer and cancer researchers. They have the normal “Solute to Service” theme, but they bring in a sponsor for that game and recognize various veterans or current military members while working with a different nonprofit organization that they work with for that game. Finally, their “Fan Appreciation” game is themed around the entire organization, but nothing is different in the store. “Crucial Catch”, “Solute to Service”, their social Justice game, and “Winter Warning” all have their own merchandise and retail for, but “Crucial Catch” and “Solute to Service” have merchandise they buy and bring in that the NFL is also selling. Each of these games have “another touch” (C. Jorgensen, Zoom interview, February 5, 2025) that they try to take onto another. They also do have a match up program for each of their games, so every game there is a collectible that fans can buy that are about the game itself rather than just one specific team. For example, if their first game of the season is with the Steelers, they would have all kinds of merchandise and products that they sell. They typically do this and promote/purchase items then Wednesday before the game.

In terms of revenue, each sector brings in a different amount each year. TV ratings are always big and she said that she would “assume its biggest for everyone for how strong their league position is” (C. Jorgensen, Zoom interview, February 5, 2025), which implied that if you are a good team, you get high TV ratings through a lot of viewership. As a whole, tickets, events, and sponsorships are a big aspect of revenue too, and retail would be in the middle of the pack. Their stadium holds up to 81,000 fans and their home games are always sold out. Even if there is a game that isn’t sold out in the beginning, there is a long waiting list that will ensure it will be before game time. She said the Packers have no worry about their ticket sales fluctuating, even if

they win or lose a specific game because of their strong fan base and sold out stadium for each game. Mrs. Jorgensen did add that their "goal is to not be the highest ticket price in the league because we want to be adorable for the fans while keeping up with the market too," (C. Jorgensen, Zoom interview, February 5, 2025). She also said that their events business is growing as the stadium holds all kinds of events throughout the year: weddings, conferences, company meetings, and more.

Dawn Turner with the Carolina Panthers

The final interview that was conducted was with the Senior Director of Brand & Consumer Marketing, Dawn Turner, at Tepper Sports & Entertainment that works with the Carolina Panthers. She does high level brand and retail for all divisions, Panthers on the NFL side and Charlotte Football Club on MLS (Major League Soccer) side, and third party event marketing for the Bank of America Stadium. Mrs. Turner discussed how the licensing process is similar between all leagues, as she spent twelve years within the NBA. Each team has its own system and said the NBA offers more flexibility for clubs than the NFL and MLS because of how strict they both are. As I mentioned earlier for some background, the Panthers have never done retail in-house and they have a contract with Fanatics Inc., who does all of the buying, creating, and running the stadium store and ecommerce for them. In simplest terms, they do all the buying and selling, and give the Panthers a cut, which depends on what is negotiated with the clubs and it depends on the ranges and margins. Legends is Fanatics one to one competitor, and smaller companies are coming up within the NFL to create competition. For the NBA, they allow a "local license", where teams can carry different products at their arena store that you can't buy

anywhere else. At the NFL and MLS, merchandising people have to use licenses on their lists no matter what, but there is more flexibility in the NBA. There are two ways the Panthers have made custom things in their store. The Panthers have done a local collaboration with a company called “Girl Tribe” the last couple of years, where they have made collections with them that are unique to them and that are only sold at the Panthers store, Girl Tribe’s website, and on the Panthers e-commerce. Mrs. Turner said these collections have been well received from fans, especially women looking for something different in the sports licensing world. This year, they are working with a couple vendors to create custom items that are designed for the Panthers and sold in their store and website.

The Carolina Panthers use their Public Relations Team to reach out to media outlets and help get story placement. Their social media team focuses a lot on outreach with different companies as a main mechanism to promote their products and brand. They work closely with the social media team to talk about what’s coming out and work within the content calendar. They can also work with other sub accounts to post about collaborations and merchandise as well, like the mascot and cheerleaders based on campaigns. They work closely with the Player Relations team when posting with specific players to have them active on social media and accept collabs through social media apps. Each of these is worked on by campaign and they tend to put everything on all platforms, most importantly Instagram, Facebook, X, and a little bit of TikTok. For an example of campaigns, they worked with “Golf Wang”, which is Tyler the Creators apparel brand, and two of the Panthers players participated in the photoshoot and online campaign. They mostly do still images on their social media and campaigns. For their 30th season collection, they worked with a photography team and got employees to be models around the stadium, field, and the stands. With the couple of drops with Girl Tribe, they had their models

come out and do a photoshoot in the stands. They've also had a collection and shoot with their Germany logo because they played in Germany this past November. Next, Julius Peppers, who went into the Panther's Hall of Fame, had a special collection to show their support to him. They had employees do the shoot and use the stadium for it. They did many drops in season with the clothing brand "UNRL", where players and cheerleaders wore their apparel to show their support. They have also done "Keep Founding for the Carolinas" where they sold around 2,000 shirts, even selling out at the first game. All proceeds went to Hurricane relief and they used elevated storytelling to enhance their brand, image, and merchandising. Although they do all of this on the side, Fanatics does all the email blasts and paid search for the Panthers and do the major heavy lifting. They sometimes include graphics and specific customization for the emails, like for Holiday promotions to their season ticket members. Finally, they also do a couple television segments each year that grow their positive brand awareness rather than focusing on revenue. Another mechanism that has helped the Panthers is implementing their RFID Checkout. This made checking out easier, faster within their small store. This allows everything to move quickly even if the store is packed because it's cashless. This has also opened up a lot of opportunities for more space in the store. As you can see, almost everything the Panthers do is digital and campaigned on social media platforms rather than using other traditional marketing strategies to promote their campaign or merchandise.

Going back to revenue, Mrs. Turner said that merchandising is probably the smallest part of revenue. Television revenue comes from the league and other categories include sponsorship, ticket, and food and beverage. Unfortunately, throughout all the interviews, I was not given any real data from what the revenue streams looked like and where they came from because it was company only information.

In terms of visibility, Mrs. Turner explained that winning isn't the biggest driver, but it always helps. Since she has worked with a couple leagues, she said "merchandise is a big brand play, but it's more about sentiment and engagement" (D. Turner, Zoom interview, February 6, 2025). The Panthers have a ton of corporate sponsors year round that have really boosted engagement, their brand as a whole, and visibility. Some examples are Verizon, Bank of America, HM Health, Lowes, Coca Cola, BoJangles, Harris Teeter Grocery Stores, Duke's Mangees, and more. All of these sponsors are really great in order to spread brand awareness.

The Packers closet is big, which entails what the players wear for each game during the season. They get their schedule in May and have to report their home jersey color to the NFL, then they have to fill in the rest based on their schedule, who they play, and what the opposing team's colors are. Like the Packers and the Steelers, they follow the same themed game schedule, but don't make as much merchandise surrounding these games as the other two do. There is specific merchandise surrounding some NFL's themes and the team wears it on the sideline, but they have to buy it all from the NFL and sell it to fans through them.

The biggest thing that sets the Panthers apart in terms of retail and digital offerings is the fact that their brand is young and they haven't won a championship yet. This allows them "to be more nimble and have more creative freedom than a lot of the older clubs (D. Turner, Zoom interview, February 6, 2025). This gives them a much wider scope of opportunity to look at ways they can engage with the fan base and digital community. Mrs. Turner believes that the Panthers have done a really great job at their most recent drops and making it compelling and interesting. With this, there is room for them to be more clever and have more personality, which is where brand strategy comes into play. They have been working on this the last couple years and she says it is starting to come to life. The idea of foundational strategy is newer for sports especially

for older clubs to be able to have a full, equal brand ecosystem that operates at max capacity. The Panthers are trying to have more exclusive merchandise that is sold and Mrs. Turner explained that they are doing more and more. These are called “Custom Collections” at the Panthers and they just have to work with a license to make sure they don’t sell it to other outlets.

In addition, the Panthers have Germany as one of their international territories. They had a game there this year and it was very successful especially in developing gross root fan engagement, which they have been working on for many years and it is paying off.

Results

My hypothesis states that digital and social media marketing will be the main form of marketing for the Steelers, Packers, and Panthers, compared to traditional marketing strategies. Based on the interviews, it was shown that all three teams used digital and social media marketing most of the time, and they found that traditional marketing strategies no longer were the most effective (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Summary of Marketing Strategies of Case Studies

NFL Team & Questions	**Pittsburgh Steelers**	**Green Bay Packers**	**Carolina Panthers**
How do they sell merchandise?	Runs Steelers Pro Shop	Runs Packers Pro Shop	Partners with Fanatics
More Traditional or Digital?	Fully Digital	Fully Digital	Fully Digital
Do they use social media platforms?	Don’t have their own merchandise accounts, use Steelers accounts to promote merch and	The merchandise department has their own social media team and social media	Conduct campaigns fully on social media and expect players on the team to post and

	send people to their Pro Shop website	accounts specifically for merchandise	collaborate with their collaborations too
How do they run their social media platforms?	Collabs with Steeler's Social Media Department	Has their own social media department for merchandise	Has their own social media team to promote products/campaigns
What social media platforms do they use?	Instagram and Facebook	TikTok, X, Facebook, Instagram	Instagram, Facebook, X, Tiktok
What mechanisms are most used?	Email is big (decreasing a little), paid search (top two in importance), buying ads, social media, organic search, little through television marketing, did billboards but stopped this, some TV spots, close to no newspaper, Steelers brand and team itself,	Direct mail, print advertisements, and telemarketing, used to print catalogs, still send some things by mail, Google & Meta ads, social media Advertising is first, social media and email fall behind this, Green Bay City is a huge attraction along with the Packers team itself	Email blasts, paid search, television segments, RFID checkout, social media
How is merchandise revenue ranked?	Brings in a good amount	Retail is in the middle of the pack	Smallest sector
What is the biggest driver in success & revenue?	Wins and losses are the biggest driver, things out of their control (players reactions), how the team loses vs. how they're doing,	Always driven by wins and losses, on field performance direct line to retail, marketing plays a big role	Winning/losing is not the biggest driver Merchandise is huge Sponsors are helpful
What is the biggest thing that sets the team apart in the merchandise market?	Give better deals than the NFL shop (gifts with purchases normally), have a ton of exclusive merchandise, launch collections with themes or specific gear	They have Green Bay to draw more people in, give better deals than the NFL shop (gifts with purchases normally), have so much exclusive merchandise, create products that no one else is carrying	Their brand is young and they haven't won a championship yet, working on

Source: Compiled by author

After comparing the marketing strategies in Table 1, I would conclude that there are no set universal marketing strategies that are used by National Football League teams. While the case study proves that some teams use some of the same specific strategies (again more specifically digital marketing), the way each individual team puts together the strategies differs. There is no “right” or “wrong” way for an NFL team to market their merchandise and each team finds success in different ways and combinations. Success can be defined differently for each team, depending on what their goals are for the season, year, or overall. Success can be looked at hitting these goals or benchmarks or it can be seen as doing well in the league playing and competitive wise. Mr. Wolfe explained that the Steelers main mechanisms they use to promote their merchandise is through email and organic and paid searches. Mrs. Jorgensen said that advertising is also the Packers number one mechanism as they have seen great success online by using google/meta ads along with clickable ads on their website. Social media is used more at the Packers than the Steelers, but similarly email is also a high mechanism that drives engagement for the Packers. For the Panthers on the other hand, social media is the biggest mechanism, as Mrs. Turner described. Their main outlet is creating social media campaigns surrounding merchandise drops and sponsorships.

Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to provide summary and conclusions of this senior comprehension project and provide feedback for further research to extend this research.

To begin, I discuss the introduction of the senior comprehensive project and introduce the purpose of the paper: examining marketing strategies used by three National Football League teams: the Pittsburgh Steelers, Green Bay Packers, and Carolina Panthers. Their marketing strategies and techniques were compared to see if they use similar strategies to be successful in the league and to provide research for how much of a role marketing plays in a team being a top team in the league. It also mentions the significance of the study: to understand how National Football League teams leverage marketing strategies for success. To do this, it brings up the main research question examined in this paper and my hypothesis:

> What marketing strategies does the National Football League use most frequently? Do the teams use different marketing strategies? Does marketing make them a top player in the league?

> Hypothesis: My hypothesis states that digital marketing is the main form of marketing used by these National Football League teams compared to the typical traditional marketing strategies. The Steelers and Packers will use similar marketing strategies and it will defer a little for the Panthers. Wins and losses are the biggest factor in being a top team in the NFL and they greatly impact marketing for a team.

My literature review provides an in-depth literature review on a range of topics pertinent to the research conducted within this comprehensive project. The literature will be separated many subsections relating to sports marketing and the many aspects that pertain to it: the Three C's of Marketing, the Sports Marketing Mix, explaining how sports fans are a huge market for consumerism, explaining the many marketing strategies used by the sports industry, the Promotion Mix, describing major media types, addressing technology advancements in sports, and finally closing with traditional marketing strategies that are falling off. To conclude this section, the major gap of the literature is explained – that most of the literature that was read included surveys and questionnaires. This gap was the baseline of my senior project and why I chose to specifically do interviews to answer my research questions and hypothesis.

Next, there is a large amount of background pertaining to every aspect of my senior comprehension project. It's divided into two main sections: the Sports Industry and the National Football League. The Sports Industry section covers an explanation of what the Sports Industry entails, how it will forever be changing and evolving, discusses the revenue increase across the sports industry as a whole (sports licensing, merchandising, broadcasting and media rights, sponsorships, social media and the digital world, and tourism), goes into detail about globalization (what it is, advantages and disadvantages, and how it's a key factor in the Sports Industry), the negatives about the Sports Industry, and ends with discussing the future direction of the Sports Industry. The second section focuses more on the National Football League, as this is the specific league that I use for my project. I begin with explaining the NFL and its background, and then dive into the revenue breakdown. I then introduced an interview I had with the Senior Manager of Football Business Operations & Strategy at National Football League

(NFL) and Allegheny Alum, Issac Gittens ‘14. I discuss information behind the interview and the list of questions I asked him. Overall, we discussed the role he has at the NFL and what he specifically does, the organization of the NFL, how the NFL prioritizes innovation in their fan’s experiences, and how football and the NFL has expanded. The next sections dive into the background and history of each of the teams I used as case studies: the Pittsburgh Steelers, Green Bay Packers, and the Carolina Panthers. I end by explaining Fanatics, Inc. and its background with an explanation and advantages and disadvantages of outsourcing because it is the partner of the Panthers that undertakes all of their merchandising.

Next is my empirical analysis for my senior comprehensive project and the methodology I chose: to conduct case studies with three NFL teams – the Steelers, Packers, and Panthers. I chose to interview the Heads of Merchandise for all three teams to address the gap in the literature I read, which related back to studies conducting questionnaires and surveys. I overviewed how I got each of the interviews and what questions I asked every interviewee. The rest of the empirical chapter is split up into three sections, one for each team and merchandise head that I interviewed – Mr. Wolfe with the Steelers, Mrs. Jorgensen at the Packers and Mrs. Turner at Tepper Sports with the Panthers. Through the interviews, I found that my hypothesis was proven correct as digital and social media marketing was the main form of marketing for the three teams, over traditional marketing. For the cases of the Steelers and Packers, their historic nature, success, following and brand image overall allows for greater fan to team connection through everything – social media engagement, ticket sales, merchandise sales, and more. The Panthers stated that marketing is the biggest factor for a brand and to get more engagement. Based on all this information, I would conclude that there are no set universal marketing

strategies that are used by National Football League teams and there is no “right” or “wrong” way for an NFL team to market their merchandise and each team finds success in different ways and combinations. While the case study proves that some teams use some of the same specific strategies (again more specifically digital marketing), the way each individual team puts together the strategies differs.

Future Research

In terms of future reach, there are a couple things I would change if I were to go back and do this project again or encourage others to look at. The main one is to interview the social media departments for each team instead of the merchandise. Because Professor Allison had a connection with John Wolfe, I stuck with the idea of interviewing people from the merchandise sector of each NFL team.

Secondly, it would be interesting to interview teams that are more popular or have a larger fanbase, if not more than the Steelers, like the Dallas Cowboys, Kansas City Chiefs, the Buffalo Bills and more.

Third, I would love to do research more specifically centered towards the fan bases. Some potential questions could be:

1. What factors contribute to the long-term loyalty of NFL fans to specific teams, and how do these factors vary across different fanbases?
2. How does fan engagement through social media platforms impact the loyalty and behavior of NFL fans?

3. To what extent does a team's performance on the field influence the level of engagement and loyalty among its fanbase?
4. How do regional demographics (e.g., age, income, ethnicity) influence the fanbase of NFL teams in different cities or regions?

Lastly, I would love to uncover real data related to the research of my project. The NFL is a very large and successful company, so a lot of their documents are private information and I was not allowed to know specific details pertaining to money, sales, budgets, etc. It would even be very interesting to know this information to understand my topic better and even find a way to quantify my findings and have data to back it up to truly compare the effectiveness of each team's marketing strategies.

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About the Author



My name is Isabella (Bella) Cowen and I am from Louisville, Kentucky. I graduate from Allegheny College May of 2025 with a Business major and Writing minor. At Allegheny, I was a part of the Varsity Field Hockey team, in which I played for all four years of college. I was an Academic Alden Scholar for 22-23', 23-24', and 24-25' school years. In 2021, I was the Newcomer Athlete of the Year for Allegheny College, Field Hockey Newcomer of the Year for NCAC, Field Hockey All-NCAC First Team, and Field Hockey NFHCA All-Region VI Second Team. I earned the "NFHCA Division III National Academic Squad" for each of the four years at Allegheny, along with the "NFHCA Division III National Academic Team Award" for the 2021-2022 year. I joined Delta Delta Delta in the Spring of 2022 during my freshman year and have held the positions of Director of Lifetime Membership (2022-2023), Director of Public Relations and Marketing (2023-2024), and Vice President of Community Relations (2024-2025). I started the Allegheny Ski and Snowboard Club in the Fall of 2023 (along with the President of the club) and have held the Social Media and Events Manager position since its founding. Post graduation, I am attending Wittenberg University as a Graduate Assistant Coach for the field hockey team. I will get my Masters in Sports Administration while being an assistant field hockey coach as well.