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Abstract
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Data were collected on average goals per game, average fights per game, divisional rivalry games, winning percentage, and percent capacity filled for each of the 30 AHL teams’ weekend games in the 2015-16 season. A regression was used to discover the relationships between the variables and attendance. It was concluded that average goals per game and average fights per game had a significant relationship with attendance, while team success had a not significant relationship with attendance. Even after the many rule changes to increase scoring and decrease fighting, fans still preferred to go to games that were high scoring and high fighting. This was important for AHL business executives to know because they were changing rules to decrease fighting, yet fans preferred high fighting. Rule changes made should have been to the fans liking so the league as a business could have profit maximized, therefore this information can help them make better decisions moving forward.

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Professional Hockey Elements Attracting Fans to AHL Games

Emma Kilmer

St. John Fisher College
Executive Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationships between on-ice professional hockey elements and attendance at American Hockey League games. It was important to this study that the AHL was the most successful North American professional hockey league in recent years in terms of increasing attendance and in 2015-16 the league set a record for total fans attending games at around 7 million. Also, recently the NHL and consequently AHL have implemented rules to increase scoring and decrease fighting; therefore it was important to conclude if those changes resulted in changed fan motivation to attend games. It was previously known that AHL fans preferred high scoring and high fighting games and were indifferent about team success when deciding on attending games before the rule changes.

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Introduction

Sport fan motivation had been studied in many contexts, but also generally in terms of why any fan attends sporting events (Wann, Schrader, & Wilson, 1999). In addition, hockey fan motivation has been examined for leagues including the National Hockey League (NHL), the American Hockey League (AHL), and the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League (QMJHL) in relation to different professional hockey elements (Paul, 2003; Paul, Weinbach, & Robbins, 2013; Paul & Weinbach, 2011). The elements that have been examined were scoring, fighting, rivalries, star power, team success, promotions, weekend versus weekday games, months of the year, and opposing teams. In light of these past studies, no research had been done on AHL fan motivation based on on-ice elements since the culture of hockey and rules have changed. The on-ice elements of professional hockey games were analyzed to determine the relationship between them and attendance in the AHL.

The sport of hockey had been known for intense games with violence, fighting, scoring and speed. “Hockey is the only major team sport in which fighting is condoned, encouraged, or, some would argue, mandated” (Stewart, Ferguson, & Jones, 1992, p. 55). But, the culture had been changing in the sport with a decrease in fighting and scoring, and many rule changes by the leagues. The NHL and AHL have implemented rules to decrease fighting, increase scoring, and increase rivalry games for reasons including the controversy over fighting and the league's' thoughts on profit maximization in regards to scoring and rivalries (Stewart, Ferguson, & Jones, 1992). AHL fan motivation has not been previously studied since the shift in culture in hockey.

The objective of this study was to evaluate the relationship between on-ice professional hockey elements and attendance. Therefore, the relationships determined the motivation fans have to attend AHL games. Prior studies have drawn conclusions on different hockey leagues
including the AHL, but no research had been done after the culture shift. Teams and leagues have based their decisions, including rules, rosters, and play style, off of what would have helped them profit maximize (Stewart, Ferguson, & Jones, 1992). This research can help determine if league and team decisions coincided with fan motivation to attend AHL games. The purpose of this study was to determine to what degree professional hockey elements draw fans to AHL games.

This research had a practical application because it provided the AHL and teams with a deeper understanding of their fans’ motivations to attend their games. This research showed the league and teams how different elements of their games impacted their attendance and how to make decisions to better profit maximize.

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationships between professional hockey elements and attendance at AHL games. The research question of this study was:

To what degree do different professional hockey elements draw fans to AHL games?

The aim of this research was to present a deeper understanding on AHL fan motivation and how different on-ice hockey elements draw people to games.

**Background Information**

**Sport Fan Motivation**

Previous research claimed that there are eight main motivations for fans to attend sporting events, which were eustress, self-esteem, entertainment, escape, economic, aesthetic, group affiliation, and family (Wann, Schrader, & Wilson, 1999). Other researchers determined that sport spectators were motivated by mental well-being and basic sport, social, and personal needs, which are related to the previous eight motivations (McDonald, Milne, & Hong, 2002).
Eustress was defined as a positive form of stress that excites people, while anxiety from the competition invigorates them (Wann et al., 1999). Positive stress and anxiety usually accompanied sporting events when exciting plays happened or close games occurred. Self-esteem was defined as a main motivator of sport spectators because sports help create a feeling of self-satisfaction within their mind. When a fan’s team does well, wins and succeeds, they felt better about themselves (Wann et al., 1999). This can be referred to as basking in reflected glory, or BIRGing. Entertainment was a third motive for sport fans, which can be seen as similar to watching television or listening to music, all acting as something to amuse an individual. Escape was related to distracting oneself from stress, boredom or dissatisfaction in their life temporarily (Wann et al., 1999). Sport fandom allows individuals to focus on the team or game at least temporarily to escape what is in their own life. Economic factors were another motive for sport fans when individuals stay engaged with the sporting events because of the ability to gamble and make money off of them. The aesthetic motive attracted certain fans to the beauty and grace in athletic performances (Wann et al., 1999). Group affiliation was referred to individuals who had the desire to belong, be with other people, and identified with something like fans, a college, or a community while they shared experiences with others (Wann et al., 1999). Similarly, family motivated sport fans by wanting to spend time with family (Wann et al., 1999).

**Hockey Fan Motivation**

Hockey specifically has on-ice elements that have attracted different people to the sport. The on-ice elements were defined as scoring, fighting, rivalries and team success, which were all large parts of the game itself that were different for every team, each game, and even each league. Paul (2003) studied variations in NHL attendance when it came to violence, scoring, rivalries and team success variables and came to different conclusions for each variable. Paul
concluded that NHL fans preferred teams that succeeded through low-scoring, high-violence and fighting styles, compared to high-scoring and low violence and fighting styles (2003). Research found that teams that scored more had a decrease in attendance, which contradicted the league’s rule changes to increase scoring to increase revenues (Paul, 2003). Research also concluded that teams that fought more often drew a larger crowd than teams that didn’t fight as often (Paul). Again, this contradicted other rule changes the NHL implemented to decrease fighting in the league, which could lead to a decrease in revenues. The rule changes to decrease fighting were the instigator penalty, requiring visors, and increasing the speed of the game (Paul). Paul concluded that games between rivals in the United States and Canada increased attendance in the NHL. When it came to team success, research concluded that more successful teams in the previous season and current season in the NHL had higher attendance (Paul). In most cases, fighting and winning are two conflicting forces in hockey, so teams need to decide which route they want to go to increase attendance and therefore profit maximize (Stewart, Ferguson, & Jones, 1992).

The AHL is the top developmental affiliate to the NHL and is a highly competitive and entertaining professional hockey league. The NHL is constantly sending skilled players down and players are competing hard to earn themselves a call up, making the league competitive and entertaining for fans (Hong, 2009). Paul, Weinbach, and Robbins (2013) studied how AHL attendance was affected by different variables such as fighting, team performance, and promotions. Research concluded that attendance increased for teams that scored more often and also increased for teams that fought more often (Paul, Weinbach, & Robbins, 2013), which was different from their parent league where fans preferred low-scoring and high-fighting games (Paul, 2003). Also, research found that team success measured in points percentage was found to
be insignificant in relation to attendance at the AHL level (Paul et al., 2013), again different from the NHL where fans preferred more successful teams (Paul). In relation to the opposing team, AHL fans were more interested in higher quality opposing teams, but rivalry games were shown to have a not significant effect on attendance (Paul et al., 2013), which was different than the NHL where rivalries were beneficial to increasing attendance (Paul). The insignificance of rivalries in the AHL could’ve been because teams play divisional opponents upwards of 6 times per season so fans could become uninterested. These same researchers also found that promotions generally had a positive effect on attendance in the AHL (Paul et al., 2013). In the AHL, team quality, scoring, fighting, and promotions were major attractors of fans (Paul et al., 2013), with fans focused on the “amusement nature of the game more than major league spectators do” (Hong, 2009).

Researchers also studied the motivation for fans of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League, a league that is a step before the professional level. The conclusion was made that winning teams and off-ice elements like day of the week and month of the year affected attendance, but on-ice elements like fighting and scoring had no effect (Paul & Weinbach, 2011). This was greatly different than both the NHL and AHL, where on-ice factors influenced attendance (Paul, 2003; Paul, Weinbach, & Robbins, 2013). Attendance in junior hockey was increased when the team won often, during the push for the playoffs in the later months of the season, and when opportunity cost of fan’s time was low during the weekend, which was similar to other hockey leagues. But, dissimilarly junior hockey fans were not attracted by scoring and fighting (Paul & Weinbach, 2011).

Fan motivation was different when it comes to which level of hockey they were watching, like the NHL, AHL, or junior leagues like the QMJHL. Different levels of hockey
attracted fans for different reasons because of the different qualities they had. Scoring, fighting, rivalries and team success were all large parts of professional hockey and what drove fans to games. Attendance was directly affected by on and off ice elements of professional hockey at every level, whether they were bringing fans to games or deterring them from coming.

**Promotion of On-Ice Elements by Hockey Leagues and Teams**

Professional hockey leagues and teams have been ever changing to increase profits and market their sport better to appeal to more fans. Researchers claimed leagues and teams’ behaviors can be explained by economic factors because they are interested in their own concerns like profit maximization (Stewart, Ferguson, & Jones, 2001). Leagues and teams have promoted different on-ice elements and have changed the league and team around them to fit what the fans wanted, so they could increase profits. Scoring, fighting and rivalries have been three large on-ice elements in hockey games, and leagues and teams have changed to try to profit maximize around those elements.

The NHL has changed many aspects of their game to increase scoring per game including abandoning the two-line pass rule, increasing space behind the net, decreasing goalie equipment size, changing overtime to 3-on-3, and increasing penalty calls for holding and hooking (Paul, 2003). The AHL has also changed to increase scoring by implementing rules such as not being able to use a timeout on an icing call and changing overtime to 3-on-3 (Wolpoff, 2017). On the other hand, the NHL has attempted to decrease fighting through rule changes such as the instigator penalty, requiring visors, and increasing the speed of the game (Paul, 2003). In the AHL, fighting has decreased because the league added rules like requiring an automatic ejection for 2 fights in one game, ejecting players for staged fights off of faceoffs, and automatically suspending players with more than 10 fights in one season (Whyno, 2017). The AHL feeds
players to the NHL, so changing rules in both leagues helped keep things consistent when transitioning. Rivalries are a big part of sports in general, but the NHL changed their structure to increase rivalry games and attempt to profit maximize from them. The NHL and AHL implemented unbalanced schedules where the divisions were realigned so teams were in the same division has their rivals (Paul, 2003). This increased the number of divisional rivalry games in the regular season. Also, they adjusted their playoff format so divisional rivalry matchups were incredibly more likely. Researchers claimed that, “success against a rival enhances the view of oneself more than success against a similarly competent competitor” (Tyler & Cobbs, 2017), therefore the NHL’s realignment strategy made sense from team’s and fan’s perspectives.

What’s Going on in the AHL?

The American Hockey League is the top minor league affiliate of the National Hockey League, with the East Coast Hockey League (ECHL) falling beneath the AHL as the second tier minor league affiliate. The NHL’s attendance had been relatively stagnant since the season after the lockout in 2004-05, with average attendance ranging from 16,537 to 17,359 per game (Barr, 2016). On the other hand, the ECHL’s average attendance was trending downward from 4,706 to 4,385 per game in 2015-16, ultimately decreasing in attendance numbers since the 2012-13 season (Janssen, 2016). With the top professional league and the lowest affiliate having different results when it comes to attendance year to year, it was interesting to see the results of the league in the middle. The AHL’s attendance has steadily increased the past 4 seasons and the league established an all-time record for total attendance in 2015-16. Attendance increased 8.6% from the 2014-15 season and 6,693,526 fans attended AHL games in 2015-16 (“AHL Teams”, 2016).

Even though the NHL, AHL, and the ECHL are all North American professional hockey leagues, they all differed when it came to trends in attendance. Different fans must be attracted to
different levels of the same sport for different reasons. Especially in the AHL, attendance is a huge determinant of how successful a franchise is. Relocation is very common in the AHL, mostly for teams that don’t do so well in attendance, for example the Albany Devils relocated to Binghamton because they were constantly last in the league in attendance (Schott, 2017). Also, ticket receipts are one of the most important sources of revenue in minor league sports so again, attendance was and continues to be important in the success and survival of a franchise (Post, 2011).

In hockey in general, the culture was changing when it came to on-ice elements specific to the sport. Enforcers, players whose main skill set was fighting and toughness, were losing their jobs and being forced to cut their careers short or go overseas because violence and fighting were decreasing to almost extinction (Gretz, 2015). Scoring was decreasing compared to recent years despite the efforts of leagues and teams who tried to increase goal scoring (Stoller, 2016). Divisional rivalries were at an all-time high because of league efforts to market them through realignment and playoff restructuring. Also, star power was marketed through leagues and teams to try to attract fans to games, like in the NHL when two “faces of the league” matched up, or in the AHL when a top prospect was in a game.

The change in the culture of the sport through the league and teams or just by naturally evolving and the differences in attendance trends in the three North American professional hockey leagues made it important to study the motivations to attend games. The AHL was the most successful league in terms of increasing attendance. Previous research has been done to determine the relationships between game elements and attendance, but not since the hockey culture and rules have changed dramatically and the AHL set a record for season attendance. This study’s goal was to understand why fans are attracted to AHL games and understand how
attendance was potentially related to on-ice elements of hockey such as scoring, fighting, rivalries, and winning percentage.

**Method**

The purpose of this research was to determine the relationships between on-ice professional hockey elements and the attendance at American Hockey League (AHL) games. This was a quantitative study using secondary data for attendance and on-ice hockey elements. Data was collected from the 2015-16 AHL season. Weekday games, defined as games Sunday through Thursday, were excluded in this study to remove potentially lower attended games. From there, 50% of each team’s games were defined as the desired sample, sampling every other Friday game and every other Saturday game. Stratified random sampling was used to get the desired sample. Secondary data was collected for percentage capacity filled in relation to attendance, scoring statistics, fighting statistics, opposing teams, and team’s points percentage and playoff history. The demographics of each team and city were also gathered to get an understanding of the background behind each team.

**Procedure**

To understand the background behind teams, cities, and the league, demographics were collected. The average attendance for the league, the number of years teams have been in the cities, and the number of years the teams have been in existence were all collected from Hockeydb.com. The population of the cities each team was in was found on Worldatlas.com. The number of miles between the AHL team and NHL team was found using Google Maps.

Attendance was looked at for each game in the sample for all 30 AHL teams. The percentage capacity was calculated by finding the capacity of each AHL arena and the
attendance of each game. The capacity for each arena was found on Sportsworldmap.com while the attendance of each home game was found on the game box scores on the AHL website.

Scoring and fighting statistics were collected for all games in the sample. For scoring, goals per game for the current season going into each game for each team were found on the game box scores on the AHL website. The fighting statistics were fights per game for the current season going into each game for each team, and they were both also found in the game box score on the AHL website.

Quantitative information on rivalries was collected for each game during the season. Rivalries in this case were matchups against divisional opponents. Information on rivalries was found in the AHL alignment. Games were put into categories depending on if they were rivalry games.

Data on team success were collected for the season prior and current season for each team in the AHL. Points percentage was collected to determine team success. Which teams made the playoffs the previous season was collected from the previous season’s standings to determine team success. Points percentage was calculated by gathering each team’s number of points going into each game and each team’s games played going into each game. These statistics were also found on the AHL standings on the AHL’s website.

**Analysis**

Once the data were collected, descriptive statistics were run on the demographic variables and the study’s main variables. The descriptive statistics ran were mean, median, mode, minimum and maximum. A regression was then ran on the variables percent capacity filled, average goals per game, average fights per game, and winning percentage. The regression analysis showed the strength of relationships between the variables and the attendance variable.
Results

Results were determined after collecting data on on-ice professional hockey elements and team’s corresponding attendance numbers. The data were from all 30 teams’ individual game statistics for the 2015-16 AHL season. The sample of the research was every other Friday game and every other Saturday game for each AHL team in the 2015-16 season. The sample included 328 total games that occurred across 30 different organizations over a one-year span. The sample was about 30% of the games played in the AHL and was 50% of the weekend games teams played that season. This sample was not representative of the population. Comparing the capacity filled mean of the sample (m=.67) and the mean of the population (m=.53), there is a difference because of the weekday games not being used in the sample. The data that were deleted were the home opener games, if selected, for each team because those games were missing data for average goals per game and average fights per game since they didn’t have a game yet.

Demographics were collected for each team to understand the background that might have affected the results of the research. For a better look at the results, refer to Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AHL Team Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distance from NHL Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main variables in this study, average goals per game, average fights per game, divisional rivalry, win percentage, and percent capacity filled were analyzed using descriptive
statistics. The mean, median, mode, minimum, and maximum statistics were collected for each variable. The descriptive statistics for each variable can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

2015-16 AHL Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Goals Per Game</th>
<th>Fights Per Game</th>
<th>Winning Percentage</th>
<th>Capacity Filled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.503</td>
<td>.674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.500</td>
<td>.684</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.500</td>
<td>1.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.975</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A regression was used to predict the relationship between the variables goals per game, fights per game, and winning percentage and the outcome variable capacity filled. The multiple regression model with 3 predictors produced $R^2 = .028$, $F(3, 324) = 3.062$, $p < .05$. There was a significant relationship between the variables and the outcome variable attendance, but 2.8% of variance was explained by the model.

Looking at the variables individually, two variables were significant while the third was not. Average home goals per game’s p-value is .041 and average home fights per game’s p-value is .034, showing a significant relationship with attendance. Home winning percentage variable’s p-value is .751 showing a not significant relationship with attendance.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between on-ice professional hockey elements and attendance at AHL games. Following the previous research, several conclusions were drawn in relation to the research question. The data supported the claim that average goals per game, average fights per game, and winning percentage drew fans to AHL
games. The data were supportive of average goals per game and average fights per game having a positive relationship with attendance, but revealed a not significant relationship between winning percentage and attendance.

Extensive research had been done previously to determine hockey fan’s motivation to attend professional hockey games. This research was done after the rule changes in professional hockey and resulting culture shift in hockey in the last several season to determine if those had any effect on fan motivation, while it was also conducted for the season where the AHL had a record total attendance. It was previously concluded that NHL fans preferred to go to games where the team is low scoring and high fighting (Paul, 2003). Lower scoring teams drew a larger crowd compared to high-scoring teams, while teams that fought more often drew a higher attendance compared to low-fighting teams (Paul). It was also concluded that NHL rivalry games drew higher attendance and successful teams in that NHL season had a higher attendance as well (Paul). Going back to this previous research showed that NHL and AHL fans valued different aspects of the sport when attending games. This study’s data corroborated the conclusion that NHL and AHL fans had different motivations to attend games. The AHL, even though is connected to the NHL, had different fan motivations to attend games than the NHL. AHL fans preferred high scoring and high fighting games, while NHL fans preferred low scoring and high fighting games.

When the AHL was studied in 2013, it was concluded that there was a strong relationship between scoring, fighting, and attendance. Paul, Weinbach, and Robbins (2013) concluded that teams that scored more had higher attendance numbers than teams that weren’t high scoring. Also, their research found that teams that fought more had higher attendance than teams that fought less often (Paul, et al., 2013). This previous research corresponded with this study’s
conclusions that there was a positive significant relationship between average goals per game, average fights per game, and attendance. Paul, Weinbach, and Robbins’ research also concluded there was a not significant relationship between team success and attendance at the AHL level, again corresponding with this study’s results. The current research findings still contradicted fan motivation to attend NHL games, while it corresponded with previous research that had been done about AHL fan motivation. Even after the many rule changes that attempted to increase scoring and decrease fighting, AHL fans still preferred to go to games with high scoring and high fighting. Also, there still remained to be a not significant relationship between team success and whether fans attend games for that team.

Limitations and Delimitations

A limitation to the study was what the attendance numbers really meant. The attendance numbers were reported on the official box scores for each game, but it was questioned whether the reported numbers were the number of tickets bought or the number of people that actually attended. Also, one team reported the same exact attendance for each game, which didn’t seem accurate or realistic and could have skewed the data.

A delimitation I set for the study was only looking at on-ice elements instead of elements controlled outside of the game such as promotions. There were a lot of things that went into AHL games besides the actual game itself that attracted people to games and those elements weren’t considered. Other delimitations that were made were only looking at one season and only having weekend games in the sample. Only the 2015-16 season was looked at because of the record total attendance and because a higher percentage of games in a season was wanted and there was not enough time for 2 seasons. Weekend games were only looked at so potentially lower attended
weekday games wouldn’t cause outliers in the data, but also caused a large portion of the games not to be looked at.

**Recommendations**

One recommendation for future studies on this topic is do a qualitative study rather than the quantitative study done. Surveying AHL fans will produce first hand results on what they prefer, high-scoring, high-fighting, rivalry games or successful teams when attending AHL games. Another recommendation is to look at off-ice elements to account for the variance in the results from this study. Also, looking at other on-ice elements like star power to go more in depth into the on-ice factors that attract fans to games.

It was concluded that scoring and fighting had a significant relationship with attendance and there was a not significant relationship between team success and attendance. This information was important for sport managers in the AHL to know moving forward, especially in the marketing and social media departments and the AHL as a league. Knowing what attracts fans to games is important for the success of the business side of AHL organizations. AHL marketers and social media managers should focus on talking about fights and high scoring games rather than talking about whether the team won or where they are in the standings. This will help attendance numbers by marketing what fans are interested in and getting them more interested to come to games. For the league itself, the AHL should reconsider whether the rule changes made were the right decision. Rule changes were made to decrease fighting, but considering the results from this study, fans enjoy fights and go to games for fights. The AHL should consider undoing those rule changes if they want to profit maximize from fan enjoyment.

**Summary**
On-ice professional hockey elements were studied to determine their relationship with AHL attendance. The purpose of this study was to determine their relationship and examine why fans went to AHL games. It was previously known that AHL fans valued scoring and fighting when going to an AHL game, but this topic was studied again after the AHL changed rules to increase fighting and decrease scoring and the AHL had a record attendance year. Descriptive statistics and a regression were used to determine the relationships between the variables. It was concluded that scoring and fighting have a significant relationship with attendance, while team success has a not significant relationship with attendance.
References


