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CASE STUDY 6

Can You Smell What "The Rock" Is Cooking? Exploring a Potential Canadian Football League–Xtreme Football League Partnership

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The COVID-19 pandemic forced Canadian Football League (CFL) commissioner Randy Ambrosie to cancel the League's 2020 season, and given CFL teams' financial dependence on gate and game-day revenues, the League had suffered substantial financial losses. The pandemic also caused the Xtreme Football League (XFL) to fold five games into its 2020 season; however, the XFL was purchased by an ownership group led by Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, with plans to resume play in 2022. Shortly thereafter, the CFL and XFL jointly announced that they would explore the possibility of partnering to grow the game of football and their respective leagues. This case challenges students to determine the best option for the CFL and commissioner Ambrosie moving forward by completing a Porter's value chain analysis for both leagues. This analysis will help students to make an informed, evidence-based decision about how well the two leagues align with one another. While there are several benefits to a potential partnership, there are also challenges that must be overcome if some type of partnership with the XFL is to be considered.

Keywords: value chain, ownership structures, professional sport, competitive advantage

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on professional sports, forcing many leagues to halt operations (Jagim et al., 2020). The leagues that were eventually able to resume play did so under strict protocols designed to limit the transmission of COVID-19, often in a "bubble" environment with no fans present (Bradish, 2020). Although many professional sport leagues eventually restarted play, government restrictions and a rejected request for a government bailout to set up such a "bubble" in Winnipeg prevented the Canadian Football League (CFL), led by commissioner Randy Ambrosie (see Appendix A), from playing a 2020 season (Campigotto, 2021; Chiang, 2020b; Zamperin, 2021). In the spring of 2021, restrictions were still being enacted to mitigate the spread of the pandemic, so it was still uncertain as to whether the League would be able to resume operations for the 2021 season (Barnes, 2020a).

In March 2021, the CFL and the Xtreme Football League (XFL) jointly announced that they would explore opportunities to cooperatively grow the game of football (Ralph, 2021b; Zamperin, 2021). The XFL had folded just five games into the 2020 season (the League's first season since 2001); however, it had been recently purchased by former CFL practice squad player and pro wrestler turned movie star, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, his business partner Dany Garcia, and RedBird Capital (Barnes, 2021a; Campigotto, 2021). The purchase of the XFL provided the league with a degree of financial stability that the CFL sought (Zamperin, 2021), after having reportedly lost $60–80 million in 2020 (Barnes, 2021a). Conversely, the CFL had already established the credibility, history, and tradition that the XFL lacked (Cairns, 2021).

Although each league possessed something that could benefit the other, Ambrosie needed to do a more thorough investigation into the long-term feasibility and sustainability of a joint arrangement with the XFL. He thought back to a strategic management course he took during his undergraduate studies where the class had learned about Porter's (1985) value chain analysis. He recalled that a value chain analysis would help him to determine which aspects of an organization's core competencies create value for that organization (Agha & Dixon, 2021). He remembered that, to conduct his own value chain analysis, he would need to consider the activities that were required in each league to produce and sell the product (Agha & Dixon, 2021). He recognized that by examining the players, facilities, and other inputs to the leagues (i.e., inbound logistics), the marketing and sales, the production of events (i.e., operations), the distribution and subsequent consumption of events (i.e., outbound logistics), and service activities that comprised the value chains of CFL and XFL teams, and the leagues themselves (Agha & Dixon, 2021; Miller, 1997), he could make a more informed decision about how well the two leagues and their value-adding activities aligned. The amount of alignment between the two leagues could help Ambrosie to justify whether or not the CFL should enter into a partnership with the XFL moving forward and, if so, what that partnership might entail. Ambrosie sat down at his computer, deciding to begin his examination with an overview of the CFL and the value-adding activities conducted by the League and the teams therein, before proceeding to do so for the XFL.

The Canadian Football League

The CFL was officially established in 1958 and is comprised of nine teams, which are geographically split into a five-team Eastern division and a four-team Western division (CFL, 2017). Of these teams, three are publicly owned and the rest are privately owned (see Appendix B; CFL, 2017). In cases where teams are privately owned, they may share staff with another sport entity that is owned by the same ownership group, which can help these teams to operate more efficiently (e.g., the Hamilton Tiger-Cats and Forge FC; Chiang, 2020b). Other than some teams forming or folding throughout the League's history, the structure of the League has changed minimally since its inception (Fogel, 2012). In its annual operations, the League is responsible for securing television and

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broadcast contracts, training referees and officials, cultivating and developing a positive, marketable brand image, and creating a game schedule for each season of play (Kostuk & Willoughby, 2012). In a normal year, before COVID-19, it was estimated that the League grossed between $200 and $400 million[1] in revenue (Hodge, 2021).

League rules stipulate that each team has a salary cap of around $5.2 million, with the average salary for each player being around $84,000 (Dunk, 2019) with the highest paid player in the league making around $700,000 per year (Murray, 2021). CFL teams carry 46 players on their game-day rosters, of which seven starters and 21 overall players must be Canadian (Ralph, 2021a). The CFL hosts a yearly entry draft for teams to select new players who can enter the draft pool from the National Football League (NFL) or any of its developmental programs (e.g., NFL International Player Pathway), the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), U SPORTS, or any of the global combines operated by the CFL; however, teams are responsible for scouting and developing the players once they have been drafted (Barnes, 2021b). Unlike in other professional sports, there is no developmental or minor league for the CFL, although the League has begun hosting programs to introduce Canadian youth to football in the hopes that they might develop into future players (FootballCanada, 2019). While the teams are responsible for developing their players, and often hold open tryouts to bolster their rosters (CFL, 2021), the League also holds international combines in the hopes of finding new players and, more importantly, developing fan interest in these markets (Chiang, 2020a). The League currently holds these combines in Europe, Latin America, and Asia (Chiang, 2020b), and has relationships with football leagues in Mexico, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Austria, Brazil, and Spain (Barnes, 2021b). By developing international players, the League hopes to increase global and domestic interest in the sport, in particular because of the ethnic diversity in large CFL markets, including Toronto, British Columbia, and Montreal (Chiang, 2020a). The League also hopes that this international development can be leveraged into international broadcast contracts for CFL games, which would provide it with additional revenue (Barnes, 2021b; Chiang, 2020a); however, at this point, it remains unclear to what extent the League will be able to monetize these relationships (Naylor, 2021).

The CFL has a number of rules that differentiate the sport from the American version played in the NFL and XFL. In the Canadian version of the sport, teams have three downs to advance the ball 10 yards compared with four downs in the American game (Fogel, 2012; Ralph, 2021a). Canadian teams play with 12 players on the field, while American teams play with 11 per side, and the Canadian field is longer and wider (110 yards long by 65 yards wide), with the goalposts placed at the goal line of 20-yard-deep (instead of the back of 10-yard-deep) end zones (Fogel, 2012; Ralph, 2021a). In addition to the aforementioned differences, the CFL utilizes a 20-s play clock, allows offensive players to move before the ball is snapped, and requires teams to field and return any punts by the opposing team (Ralph, 2021a). However, the skills required to play each version of the game are transferable as, over the years, a number of the CFL's most notable players either transitioned to a career in the NFL or vice versa, including Doug Flutie, Warren Moon, and Jeff Garcia (Barnes, 2020b; Shire, 2012).

The CFL operates an 18-game regular season that runs between June and November of each year (Kostuk & Willoughby, 2012). After a 3-week playoff period, the season culminates with the Grey Cup, the oldest professional football trophy in North America, being awarded to the championship team (Fogel, 2012; Kostuk & Willoughby, 2012; Ralph, 2021b). The Grey Cup is one of the most highly viewed television events in Canada each year (Kostuk & Willoughby, 2012), with tickets for the 2019 Grey Cup in Calgary ranging from $99 to $494 (Hudes, 2019). Games are played between Thursday and Monday of each week during the regular season, and each team plays one game per week, with the exception of "bye" weeks (Kostuk & Willoughby, 2012).

The largest source of revenue for CFL teams is gate receipts, which can comprise between 32% and 43% of a team's total operational revenue, which is much higher than in other professional sport leagues (Chiang, 2020b; Ralph, 2021a; Saskatchewan Roughriders, 2020; Winnipeg Football Club, 2019). These relative percentages of operational revenue are even higher (over 50% in some cases) when considering the additional revenue derived from having fans present in the stadium on game days, including concession and merchandise sales (Chiang, 2020b; Saskatchewan Roughriders, 2020; Winnipeg Football Club, 2019). Each CFL team employs aspects of both variable and dynamic ticket pricing (McCarthy, 2014), as ticket prices depend on such factors as the opponent for the game, the level of rivalry between the two teams, and each team's win–loss record (Drayer et al., 2012; TicketSmarter, 2021). Ticket sales are managed using platforms such as Ticketmaster and may be purchased as single-game tickets, season tickets, or flexible ticket packages for multiple games (CFL.ca, 2021; TicketSmarter, 2021). Each team offers different benefits to season ticket purchasers, some of which include merchandise and concessions discounts on game days and access to special events (Calgary Stampeders, 2021b; Hamilton Tiger-Cats, 2021; Ottawa RedBlacks, 2021).

The League and teams also utilize sponsorships as an additional revenue source (Barnes, 2020a). New Era is the official uniform supplier for the League (Creamer, 2019), and jerseys feature the logo of one League sponsor (Campbell, 2017; Dallaire, 2017) and one team sponsor. Most sponsorship arrangements in the CFL operate at both the team and League level, with these arrangements generally bringing in six figures per sponsor, depending on their level of involvement (Rody, 2020). Fortunately for the CFL, many of the League's sponsors remained loyal throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and the cancellation of the 2020 season, allowing teams to activate and leverage these sponsorships through team and League-operated social media channels and websites (Chiang, 2020b). Through these platforms, the League and teams facilitated 11 million engagements, of which 65% include pictures of the players in their uniforms (Dallaire, 2017), presenting a great opportunity for jersey sponsors. In addition to the aforementioned sponsorships, many CFL teams are also able to negotiate the naming rights sponsorships for their home stadiums, the construction of which is often at least partially publicly funded (The Canadian Press, 2011, 2013). In order for the CFL to remain sustainable into the future, the teams and League should also try to expand their current sponsorships so that this stream of revenue makes up a greater proportion of League and team totals (Barnes, 2020a).

The CFL is much more popular in Western Canada, where there are fewer alternative options for sport and entertainment (Angus Reid Institute, 2018; Rody, 2020) than in cities such as Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa, in which there are Major League Soccer, National Hockey League, Major League Baseball, and/or National Basketball Association teams (Chiang, 2020b). Despite these alternatives, average attendance for CFL games in 2019 was still 22,917 (Hodge, 2021). The CFL also promotes and markets its

major rivalry games and players, in particular those who are Canadian (Steinberg, 2020); however, it does not do so to the extent that is witnessed in other professional sport leagues, particularly the NFL (Gregor, 2016).

In addition to employing the players, coaching staff, and front office staff, each team also has a staff responsible for game-day operations and entertainment (Gouchee, 2020). For each game, teams provide or are responsible for outsourcing first aid and paramedic support, guest services staff, public relations staff, gate security, stadium security, field security, ticket takers, ushers, and concessions and merchandise vendors (Calgary Stampeders, 2021a). Additionally, some teams operate a bus service to shuttle fans to and from games, and also operate game-day parking lots (Winnipeg Football Club, 2019). Teams also have a public address announcer and in-game host to assist in generating a positive and exciting environment to enhance the fan experience, and a game-day operations staff to script all of the in-game sponsor activations, organize half-time entertainment, and operate the jumbotron, and other video boards (Gouchee, 2020).

Relative to other professional sport leagues, such as the NFL, the CFL lacks major sources of centrally derived revenue (Chiang, 2020b). At $50 million annually split between the nine teams and the League itself, the CFL's television deal with The Sports Network (TSN) pales in comparison to the NFL's $3 billion (United States) in broadcast deals (Chiang, 2020b). Since 2008, CFL games have only been televised by a single Canadian broadcaster (Kostuk & Willoughby, 2012), although the League now streams internationally through a partnership with the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) and its international subsidiaries, which include BT Sports and MVS communications (CFL.ca, 2019; TSN, 2013). The League also has a partnership with Facebook through which a pregame show is broadcast on Thursday nights in an attempt to reach a younger demographic (Campbell, 2018), as the CFL fan base is rapidly aging (half of football fans 55 and older prefer the CFL to the NFL), and many younger Canadians (half of football fans under 35) prefer to watch the NFL (Angus Reid Institute, 2018). CFL teams also broadcast games locally on the radio (Calgary Stampeders, 2021a). In order to grow the game within Canada, the League may want to consider some type of regional streaming options outside of its national contract with TSN (Chiang, 2020b).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the League requested $30 million from the Canadian federal government in order to hold the 2020 season in a "bubble" environment without fans (Campigotto, 2021; Chiang, 2020b; Zamperin, 2021), similar to the approach taken in other professional sport leagues. However, the request was denied, and it is estimated that the CFL, as a whole, lost between $60 and $80 million because the season was not played (Barnes, 2021a; Ralph, 2021a). Given each team's reliance on ticket sales, it is important that the League operates with fans in attendance when possible to avoid financial losses for both the League and its teams (Chiang, 2020b). Due to economic difficulties spurred by the pandemic, the League made substantial staffing cuts in August of 2020, which included terminations, furloughs, and hourly reductions (Barnes, 2020a). Therefore, moving forward, the League and its teams will need to find a more sustainable business model for generating revenue that is less reliant on ticket sales (Barnes, 2020a). This model may include new revenue streams from sport betting, which was recently legalized in Canada, improved merchandising, or video game licensing opportunities (Barnes, 2020b; Chiang, 2020b).

Given the League's recent financial difficulties, there may be an opportunity for the CFL to try and secure a greater position within the enormous football market in the United States (Barnes, 2020a). During the 1994 and 1995 seasons, the League expanded its operations into the United States, an endeavor which saw teams be introduced in Baltimore, Birmingham, Las Vegas, Memphis, San Antonio, Sacramento, and Shreveport (CFL, 2017; Kostuk & Willoughby, 2012). As part of the expansion, the League did not require the American teams to have a minimum number of Canadian players on their roster, which may have contributed to the Baltimore Stallions winning the 1995 Grey Cup (CFL, 2017). However, despite the on-field success of the American teams, the CFL had trouble establishing itself within the U.S.' football market once the NCAA and NFL seasons began (Willoughby & Mancini, 2003). Therefore, the American expansion teams were folded or dissolved in 1996, only 2 years after the initial expansion (CFL, 2017; Kostuk & Willoughby, 2012).

The Xtreme Football League

In February of 2000, World Wrestling Entertainment owner Vince McMahon announced that he would be creating a football league dedicated to "smash-mouth" football for normal fans (Willoughby & Mancini, 2003), as he perceived the NFL to be heading in a direction that was too professionalized (Fournier et al., 2002). McMahon thought football was becoming less about football than the players, so he envisioned the XFL as a style of football that would reflect more action, and faster, wide-open play, and cause individual personalities to resonate with the crowd, as was the case with the wrestlers involved in the World Wrestling Entertainment (Fournier et al., 2002). In an attempt to generate publicity and legitimacy around the new League, McMahon recruited players from what he considered to be one of the golden ages of the NFL to coach and work as League officials (Fournier et al., 2002). The League was also jointly owned and operated by the National Broadcasting Company which, along with two smaller networks, broadcasted XFL games (Allentuck, 2020; Willoughby & Mancini, 2003). In an attempt to avoid the mistakes realized by previous leagues that were established to compete with the NFL, the XFL limited player salaries and implemented a bonus structure for winning regular season games, including a $1 million (United States) bonus to be split among the players on the championship team (Willoughby & Mancini, 2003).

To generate excitement for the opening week, the XFL introduced rule adjustments, adopted aggressive marketing tactics, and promised technological advancements to the broadcast and behind-the-scenes fan involvement with the game (Willoughby & Mancini, 2003). The first week of the 2001 XFL season was considered massively successful, drawing 15.7 million viewers, but viewership declined dramatically after that point (Allentuck, 2020). By the fourth week, the League had lost a number of the large, multinational sponsors that had helped it to launch, and resorted to offering free airtime to advertisers (Willoughby & Mancini, 2003). Although it was considered to have been extremely well marketed and promoted, the League folded after one season (Fournier et al., 2002; Willoughby & Mancini, 2003). Some of the main reasons behind the League folding were that it tried to appeal to both football fans and wrestling fans, while managing to capture the support of neither (Willoughby & Mancini, 2003), and that it relied more on marketing gimmicks

and an unsustainably violent version of the game to try and appeal to fans (Allentuck, 2020).

Despite the lack of success in 2001, and following the 2019 folding of the Alliance of American Football, another spring football league (Ralph, 2021a), the XFL returned as a single-entity league that was centrally owned by Vince McMahon in February of 2020 (Allentuck, 2020; McCann, 2018). The 2020 season of the XFL included eight teams that were placed in cities considered to have strong existing football fan bases, some of which already had an NFL franchise, including Seattle, Tampa Bay, and New Jersey/New York (Allentuck, 2020; Barnes, 2021a). These teams were geographically divided into an Eastern and Western conference (Businesswire, 2019). In addition to these teams, and because there was no minor or developmental league for the XFL, the League created "Team 9," which was a 40-player squad that could be available to teams to fill any open spots in the rosters that resulted from injuries (Garcia, 2020). Since teams played in existing stadia, many of which were already home to NCAA or professional sport teams (Benjamin, 2018), the XFL was not able to sell any naming-rights sponsorships for them. Since this incarnation of the XFL was centrally owned and operated, the responsibility for marketing and promoting the League and its teams, determining broadcast contracts, and employing the coaches, players, and any additional training staff rested not with the teams, but with the League itself (McCann, 2018).

In both 2001 and 2020, the XFL began its season in February and was positioned as a spring football league in an effort to fill the void left by the NFL during its off-season (Ralph, 2021a). In 2020, the League was slated to play a 10-game season, with a four-team postseason that would end with a championship game in late April (Allentuck, 2020). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the League was only able to play five of the scheduled games, after which the League was forced to shut down due to bankruptcy (Allentuck, 2020; Barnes, 2021a; Campigotto, 2021; Ralph, 2021a). At the time of the bankruptcy filing, the parent company of the XFL reported assets of over $28 million (United States) and liabilities over $31 million (United States), in addition to reporting that it had 1,000–5,000 creditors (Allentuck, 2020; Perry, 2020). These creditors included seven of the League's eight coaches, four venues, a nonprofit organization (St. Louis Sports Commission), and a television broadcasting services company (Fenno, 2020).

Players in the XFL were entitled to a per-game fee of $1,685 (United States), with a victory bonus of $2,222 (United States), which could earn them as much as $4,947 (United States) each game (Dunk, 2019). This brought the average salary for XFL players who played throughout the season to around $55,000 (United States; assuming a record of 5–5), with the League's salary cap being approximately $4 million (United States; Dunk, 2019). Based on the impact of quarterback play on the quality of the game, the XFL committed substantially more money to secure a group of reliable and talented quarterbacks, often for as much as 10 times the base salary of a normal position player, with starting quarterbacks earning $495,000 (United States) per year (Seifert, 2020). The quality of on-field play, particularly the quarterbacks, was something that the XFL had correctly identified as being a hindrance to the League's success in its original 2001 season (Seifert, 2020; Willoughby & Mancini, 2003). The League tried to promote these players in an effort to garner the attention of fans who may have recognized some of the names as having previously played in the NFL (XFL, 2020). Each of the eight teams in the XFL was assigned a quarterback before the League-operated draft to ensure parity (Young, 2019). At the draft, the teams filled their 71-player rosters from a pool of 1,000 professional football players using a snake draft format, which meant that teams with the first pick in a given round would pick last in the succeeding round (Barrabi, 2019). The League also required teams to pick their offensive skilled players first, offensive line second, defensive line third, defensive backfield fourth, and then had an open format for the remaining players (Barrabi, 2019). The rosters were then finalized at 52 players after the conclusion of training camps (Garcia, 2020).

Not only did the XFL play using a rule set that was different than that utilized by the CFL, it also differed from the NFL on a number of fronts. Similar to the other American rule sets, and in contrast to the Canadian game, XFL contests were played on a field that was 100 yards long and 53 yards wide, with end zones that were 10 yards deep and had goalposts at the back (Ralph, 2021a). Additionally, the XFL was played with 11 players on the field per team, and offensive players could not move before the ball was snapped (Ralph, 2021a). However, contrary to kickoffs in the NFL, the XFL only allowed the player who kicked the ball and the returner on the opposing team to move before the ball was caught (Allentuck, 2020), which led to almost three times the number of kicks being returned in the XFL compared to the NFL (Seifert, 2020). The XFL also utilized a 25-s play clock instead of the 40-s clock used in the NFL and employed more efficient and comprehensive radio communication between coaches and players to reduce the total time in a game without decreasing the number of plays (City News Service, 2020; Seifert, 2020). In the XFL, teams did not have the option to kick an extra point after a touchdown and instead had the choice of attempting offensive plays worth one, two, or three points (City News Service, 2020; Seifert, 2020). Additionally, any punts that went into the end zone from in between either of the 40-yard lines resulted in possession at the 35-yard line, instead of at the 20, so as to encourage teams to attempt another offensive play on fourth downs in that area (City News Service, 2020; Seifert, 2020). One of the most notable differences between the XFL rules and those in all other leagues was that if a pass was completed behind the line of scrimmage, a second forward pass could be attempted (City News Service, 2020).

A major goal of the reinvigorated XFL was to make the game more accessible to fans (City News Service, 2020). As such, players and coaches were required to do interviews during the games (Allentuck, 2020), coaches made play calls on national broadcasts (Seifert, 2020), and officials and referees were required to wear microphones (City News Service, 2020; Seifert, 2020). The result of this was greater transparency during referee and replay official decisions, but this transparency could also reveal mistakes that were made by these officials (Seifert, 2020), which could not be challenged by coaches, but could be reviewed by the replay official (City News Service, 2020). Although the teams did not have individual team websites, they all maintained various social media platforms, and had a team homepage via the XFL's website (XFL, 2021). The League's social media channels generated 28 million instances of fan engagement before the season was canceled, including 1.2 billion impressions on social media (Re: Alpha Entertainment LLC, 2020).

Tickets for XFL games could be purchased as single-game tickets, season tickets, or flex-packs (Shea, 2020), with season tickets ranging in price per game from $20 to $100 (United States) for each seat, depending on the location. These season tickets were priced very consistently across the League (Perry, 2019). Single-game tickets, the sale of which were outsourced to ticketing

platforms such as Ticketmaster, ranged in price from $24 to over $100 (United States) per game (Shea, 2020). One of the goals of the XFL was to ensure that tickets were affordable and accessible, so it cost less to bring a family of four to an XFL game than it did to bring them to a NFL, National Basketball Association, or National Hockey League game (Shea, 2020). The XFL's prices were also comparable to Major League Baseball and Major League Soccer tickets, depending on the market (Shea, 2020). In addition to offering season ticket purchasers perks such as discounts on team merchandise, unique team-related experiences throughout the year, and a field pass to one home game per season, the XFL also allowed these purchasers to be part of an advisory network that allowed fans the opportunity to provide feedback about what they wanted to see from the League (Perry, 2019). Since the League was centrally owned, these benefits were the same for each team (Perry, 2019). While none of the teams within the League had any jersey sponsors, one team did place a sponsor's logo on players' helmets (Raglin, 2020). Furthermore, not only did the League acknowledge sport betting, it also partnered with gambling and daily fantasy sport entities including FanDuel, DraftKings, and the Action Sports Network (Seifert, 2020). The XFL also created a mobile app that provided fans with the opportunity to win money for correctly picking the winners of games (SVG Staff, 2020). Before the stoppage due to the pandemic, between January and April of 2020, the League reportedly made almost $20 million (United States; Perry, 2020). The XFL President also indicated that the cancellation of the remainder of the 2020 season prevented the league from generating approximately $27 million (United States) from game day–related spending, such as ticket sales, concession purchases, and fan merchandise, in addition to the loss of any revenue that would have been generated during the playoffs (Re: Alpha Entertainment LLC, 2020).

During the 2020 season, XFL teams experienced an average attendance of 18,614 fans per game, ranging from just over 13,000 fans at some games to almost 29,000 at others (Seifert, 2020). XFL fans tended to be younger and fell within the category of millennials (Seifert, 2020). XFL games were broadcast on ESPN, FOX, and the American Broadcasting Company, although the League did not receive any upfront rights fees (Barnes, 2021a). As part of the arrangement, the networks covered the cost of production in exchange for control of the sale of advertising time during the broadcasts, while the League retained the rights to sell sponsorships (Glasspiegel, 2019). The broadcasts of XFL games included live betting lines, which provided not only an avenue for revenue, but also may have helped to appeal to new demographics of fans (Seifert, 2020). There was an average of 3.12 million viewers for the first week of XFL games, and the networks averaged higher than 2 million viewers for each game (Seifert, 2020). During the 2020 season, games were predominantly scheduled for Saturdays and Sundays, with the exception of two Thursday games in Weeks 9 and 10 of the season (Glasspiegel, 2019).

Each XFL team employed 25 people in football operations and 25 people in business operations (Rachuk, 2019), for a total of 400 staff members in roles that ranged from community managers to social media, marketing, and coaching staffs (Re: Alpha Entertainment LLC, 2020). Head coaches performed the roles of both coach and general manager for their respective teams (Rachuk, 2018). Before XFL games, the League or the individual teams sponsored tailgate parties that included bands, food, beverages, and merchandise (Dhingra, 2020). Games included an in-stadium disc jockey but, due to the shortened halftime, fans would get to experience the coaches' half-time locker-room speeches instead of some more traditional entertainment options (Dhingra, 2020). The League also decided to work with current in-venue food and beverage concessions operators, and hoped to be able to provide food, beverage, and parking for a family of four for around $100 (United States; Dhingra, 2020).

After the League filed for bankruptcy, it was purchased by a new ownership group consisting of Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, Dany Garcia, and RedBird Capital Partners, for $15 million (United States) with the intention of resuming play in 2022 (Barnes, 2021a; Campigotto, 2021; Ralph, 2021a). Johnson, a former CFL practice squad player who later became a wrestler, and then an international movie star, brings a great deal of attention, clout, and allure to the XFL, perhaps even on an international scale (Ralph, 2021a). Garcia, the ex-wife of Johnson, has managed his career and is the owner of Seven Bucks Productions, a company which has produced notable movies, including Hobbs & Shaw (Ralph, 2021a). Finally, RedBird Capital Partners manages over $4 billion (United States) and has investment stakes in two European soccer clubs and in Wasserman Media, an international sport marketing agency (Naylor, 2021; Ralph, 2021a).

CFL–XFL Talks

In March of 2021, the XFL and CFL announced that they would be commencing talks that would explore the possibility of partnering, in the hopes of working symbiotically to grow their respective leagues (Ralph, 2021b; Zamperin, 2021). The XFL then announced that it would delay the anticipated return to the field until an outcome had been decided in their discussions with the CFL (Barnes, 2021a; Campigotto, 2021). The CFL also announced in April of 2021 that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the start of the League's next season would be pushed back and teams would play a reduced number of games (Ralph, 2021b). There were few details provided by either league regarding the talks, other than that they would be discussing ways in which they might be able to collaboratively grow the game of football (Ralph, 2021b). However, there were a number of potential outcomes from these talks, which included a full merger of the two leagues, no partnership at all, or some type of joint marketing plan, revenue sharing system, or a mechanism whereby the leagues could share, loan, or trade players (Campigotto, 2021). Another possible outcome was a scenario in which the XFL could provide the CFL with a much needed cash supplement to help the League move through its financial difficulties (Barnes, 2021a; Zamperin, 2021). This cash supplement would allow the XFL to associate with the tradition and history of the CFL, giving the League much needed credibility, as the League had not played more than one full season in either incarnation (Barnes, 2021a; Zamperin, 2021).

Now that Ambrosie had gathered information on the leagues, their value-adding activities, and considered what types of joint arrangements the leagues could explore, he needed to carefully consider the benefits and drawbacks of a joint arrangement. A potential merger or partnership between the CFL and XFL could have considerable implications for the sale of the media rights associated with such an endeavor, as the leagues would be present in some of the top designated market areas in North America, including Los Angeles, New York, Toronto, and Montreal (Barnes, 2021a). The leagues would also have the potential to reach, and eventually expand into, more of these markets in both Canada and the United States (Barnes, 2021a). Furthermore, a player-sharing arrangement or merger would increase the level of player talent on the field (Barnes, 2021a). The leagues' expanded domestic

presence and increase in player talent could result in an increase in the value of the game broadcasts to as much as $100 million (United States) annually in media rights (Barnes, 2021a). Additionally, the relationships that the CFL had established with numerous international football entities could be useful if the leagues were to attempt to jointly expand their presence at the international level (Naylor, 2021). The result of the expansion of the game internationally, expanded reach into North America's top designated markets, and increased player talent on-field, could also result in an entity that has the scope, and popularity, to justify the creation of a video game, which may further compound each league's popularity (Cairns, 2021). Furthermore, a marketing or broadcast partnership between the leagues would expose Canadian fans to the XFL and American fans to the CFL (Barnes, 2021a; Zamperin, 2021). As such, the CFL would gain exposure to the younger demographic that the XFL attracts, which could help sustain the League moving forward (Seifert, 2020). The XFL also has preexisting relationships with gambling entities, and a partnership between the leagues may allow the CFL to also capitalize on, and profit from, these partnerships (Seifert, 2020).

Despite the benefits, a complete merger between the two leagues could be extremely problematic because of the different rule sets in each league. Given the history and tradition of the CFL, it would be difficult to convince the aging fan base to adopt a different set of rules simply because of the money that the CFL might be able to generate from partnering or merging with the XFL (Cairns, 2021; Zamperin, 2021). This difficulty would in large part stem from the association between the CFL's rules and the League's tradition and uniqueness (Cairns, 2021; Zamperin, 2021). Moreover, as the CFL's 2-year expansion into the United States previously demonstrated, it may not be logistically possible to actually fit a CFL field into preexisting American stadiums (Ralph, 2021a), which would mean that new stadia would need to be built to support play in this format. In addition, each league plays during a different season, and it would be very difficult for CFL teams that play in open-air stadiums to commence play in February during the harsh Canadian winters (Ralph, 2021a). However, it would also be challenging for the XFL to commence play in the summer, as once the NFL and NCAA began their seasons, it would be difficult to attract football fans to a league that is not yet well established (Ralph, 2021a). Additionally, despite the new ownership group and what they bring to the XFL, the League has not yet completed more than one full season of play, and its current status under this new ownership group is uncertain (Ralph, 2021a), so it would be difficult to predict how viable a merger or partnership might be for the CFL and XFL in the future.

Conclusion

Ambrosie had plenty to consider as he prepared for these discussions with the XFL. Although partnering with the XFL could have numerous benefits for the CFL, there were a number of logistical and other issues that would need to be resolved before a single down of football could be played under some type of partnership between the leagues. Now that Ambrosie had compiled information on the activities associated with the production and sale of the product for both CFL and XFL teams and leagues, including the inbound logistics, operations, marketing and sales, outbound logistics, and service activities, he could make a more informed decision on the best course of action for the CFL moving forward. Moreover, there were various additional factors that he may have to consider in making this decision, including the impact on different stakeholders. He had a number of options for how he might wish to proceed, but he needed to decide which course of action would be best for the CFL, regardless of whether or not that included a joint arrangement with the XFL.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the value chain differ in a spectator sport context relative to more traditional industries?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the team/league value chains in the CFL and XFL?
3. Based on a comparison of the value chains of the CFL, the XFL, and the teams therein, is there sufficient alignment to justify a partnership moving forward? Why or why not?
4. Outside of the context of a partnership with the XFL, what is the best course of action for the CFL to address the issues the League is currently facing?
5. What are the similarities and differences between a single-entity and distributed club ownership models?
6. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of the XFL operating as a single-entity league?

Note

1. Monetary values presented in Canadian dollars unless otherwise specified.

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Appendix A: Randy Ambrosie

Randy Ambrosie is the 14th commissioner in the history of the CFL, and he has held the position since 2017 (Strong, 2017; The Canadian Press, 2017). He was a finalist for the role in 2015, but it was given to Jeffrey Orridge (Strong, 2017; The Canadian Press, 2017). Ambrosie completed a Bachelor of Commerce degree at the University of Manitoba, and was the second overall draft pick in the 1985 CFL draft (CFL.ca Staff, 2017). He played nine seasons in the CFL, winning a Grey Cup in 1993 (Strong, 2017; The Canadian Press, 2017). After retiring, he served as the secretary of the CFL Players' Association before holding various positions in sales, marketing, and finance, eventually serving as President of AGF Funds Inc. and President and CEO of MacDougall, MacDougall, and MacTier, a Canadian wealth management firm (Strong, 2017; The Canadian Press, 2017). During his tenure as CFL commissioner, Ambrosie secured a new broadcast deal with TSN, considered integral to the League's future, and has overseen the sale of multiple CFL franchises (Ralph, 2019). He also spearheaded the "'CFL 2.0"' initiative to grow the game internationally, through partnerships with foreign football governing bodies and international combines, and domestically, through the CFL futures program (Michaels, 2019; Ralph, 2019).

Appendix B: CFL/XFL Teams (as of March 2020)

CFL		XFL
East	**Owner**	**East**
Montreal Alouettes	S and S Sportsco	DC Defenders
Ottawa RedBlacks	Ottawa Sports and Entertainment Group	New York Guardians
Toronto Argonauts	Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment	St. Louis Battlehawks
Hamilton Tiger-Cats	Bob Young	Tampa Bay Vipers
Winnipeg Blue Bombers	Publicly owned	
West		**West**
Saskatchewan Roughriders	Publicly owned	Dallas Renegades
Edmonton Elks	Publicly owned	Houston Roughnecks
Calgary Stampeders	Calgary Sports and Entertainment	Seattle Dragons
B.C. Lions	The Estate of David Braley	L.A. Wildcats

Note. CFL = Canadian Football League; XFL = Xtreme Football League. (Barnes, 2021a; Businesswire, 2019; CFL, 2017).

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