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## S5E5: What opportunities exist in sports management?

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## **S5E5: What opportunities exist in sports management?**

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**Run Time:** 00:26:10

Sports have significant value for many people for various reasons. It serves as entertainment for some, a passion for others and a \$1.3 trillion international industry for entrepreneurs.

College students studying business will find many career opportunities in sports management upon graduation. The Maine Business School at UMaine capitalized on the demand for college graduates with business degrees by creating a new sports management major. In this episode of “The Maine Question” podcast, we explore the employment prospects in the sports management field with Jason Harkins and Muralee Das, Maine Business School faculty who helped create this new major at UMaine.

### **Transcript**

[background music]

Jason Harkins: Some of the statistics that we pulled down when we were talking and sharing the opportunities that exist here is that this is a \$1.3 trillion industry globally.

Ron Lisnet: That’s Jason Harkins, Associate Dean of the Maine Business School at UMaine, talking about the business of sports, an industry that is growing and evolving, employing hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people, worldwide. I’m Ron Lisnet, and this is “The Maine Question” podcast.

Whether it’s Little League Baseball, or Youth Soccer, Division I college athletics, the NFL or the Olympics, the business of sports is booming. There’s a great need out there for people to manage and market teams, manage facilities, help athletes with their finances, and dozens of other areas in the field of sports management.

UMaine now has a path for students to follow who want to enter this growing field with a major in sports management. The first official new major added to the business school in many years.

The program at UMaine is working with an established major at the University of Southern Maine. As the state’s division 1 athletics program, UMaine has a number of attractive

teams and opportunities for sports management majors to collaborate on. The demand is there from current and incoming students.

We talked about this major and the opportunities it presents with Jason Harkins and Muralee Das, who teaches management in the Maine Business School. Earlier in his career, he saw firsthand what this world looks like working for a decade in the world of professional soccer.

What kinds of career opportunities are out there in the world of sports? Our focus on this episode of The Maine Question.

Thank you both for taking the time to talk to us. This sounds like a really interesting proposition you guys have going. Maybe first of all, I'll have both of you just say your name and what your title is so folks listening can tell who is who. Jason, let's start with you.

Jason: Thanks for having me. Jason Harkins. I'm the Associate Dean of the Maine Business School and an Associate Professor of Entrepreneurship.

Muralee Das: My name is Muralee Das. I'm an Assistant Professor of Management at the Maine Business School.

Ron: This is the first new major that's been added to the Maine business curriculum in, what, 56 years or so? Can you talk about the timing of this? Why is now a good time for this to happen?

Jason: That's a great question. At the Maine Business School, we've been focused, and remain focused, on the business core. That there is a core set of skills that anybody in any organization working anywhere in the world benefits from having a deep education in.

However, we have identified in the last couple of years, some opportunities to serve unique populations in deep and meaningful ways by providing them opportunities to dive in and develop their expertise in an industry where we think that there is an enormous need for some specialized set of training.

Sport management is the first, but surely not the last of those areas in which we will develop a focus around a major to serve those industries and the opportunities that exist therein.

Ron: Muralee, does this feel like it was time to pull the trigger on this, and this is a good time to get this going?

Muralee: I'll add to what Jason said. We've been both, I would say, forward-thinking and lucky in this. We started this discussions about the major way back in 2018. Then we got lucky twice. One is in 2019 when we had a new dean. The current dean, Faye Gilbert,

executive dean, she came on board. She also had sports industry experience plus management experience.

She was 110 percent supportive for this. We had faculty who were interested. It took almost two years to get the major going through the rigorous process with the internally. I liked that process because while that was happening, we got lucky twice.

The sports industry restructured. Not because of COVID, but because of some legal decisions. Also, the current sports deans realized that you can monetize your assets way differently.

By the time we got the major out, we had a program that was tested internally and was designed for the external changes, and now the changes actually happened. Timing-wise, this is very lucky for us. We were thinking ahead three years ago, anyway.

Ron: Jason, give us an idea of what the landscape looks like? What are opportunities waiting out there for graduates that specialize in sports management?

Jason: There's a whole variety of areas of specialization. There's the things that everybody thinks about. You go work for a big team, whether it's in soccer, or football, ice hockey, baseball. Those are the things that everybody thinks about.

There is an increasing scope of opportunities that exist around supporting facility management, doing things like spectator safety management, and working in high school, and even down into Pee-Wee Leagues.

Then there are these burgeoning new opportunities in areas, including one that Muralee has developed in his own courses. We have some unique expertise on UMaine's campus in esports where the landscape is changing and sport is no longer just a major national league of some sort, but there's international sport, there's esports, and everything in between.

Ron: I imagine this major is built on, as you alluded to, Jason, a solid foundation. These students are still taking accounting and finance and marketing courses, and then they expand on that and try to apply it to this particular specialty of sports management. They take those basics and apply it in that area?

Jason: Let me talk a little bit about the core, and then Muralee will talk about what the major itself looks like. At the Maine Business School, all students, regardless of their major, take the same 11 courses in common, which is a common curriculum that world-class business schools use all over the country.

They're introduced to accounting, and finance, marketing, management, information systems, law, business strategy. They get introduced to all of this content, and all of it is brought together across the core for all of those students.

What the majors do then, is they allow students to dive more deeply into a particular domain. Muralee could talk about the track that is the sport management major itself.

Muralee: We took the view of the industry. I'm from industry before this. I was working in the sports industry. I used the networks and asked, "What is the market going to need in the next five years at least?" Then we realized that there are three main core courses that we need out of the five required to become a sports management major.

The three, obviously, marketing is very important in sports because everything relies on broadcasting rights, marketing rights, etc. We offer sports marketing as one of the core. Then you need to know the business of sports. What is the business? We offer sports management which covers that aspects of it from every single thing.

Someone who just takes sports management will understand that it is business per se, and walk out of there. The third one is very important. We're going to offer there first time at the University of Maine, a course called Sports Practicum, which essentially builds up relationships with external parties in sports in a consulting role.

We are going to help the students connect with organizations which want to develop projects in sports. Some of the projects are currently there. Some of them will be going up front. They need support. The students get that consulting experience and then understand the sport industry much deeper. This is not an internship. It's a practicum. It's far deeper breadth and also depthwise.

After that they finish the three core courses, we are planning to offer two electives that students can take. We hope to have it arrange it like this. One of the electives is, for example, esports.

Another one could be sports ethics. Another one could be sales and sports, for example. Another one is sports analytics. They have to pick two out of that choices, and then add to the three core, that will be five subjects.

Ron: Anybody who's seen the movie "Moneyball" knows that analytics are coming into sports, and that's obviously the big topic. Jason, you talked about the opportunities that are out there. Obviously, there's some obvious ones. The NFL, NBA, Major League Baseball, that kind of thing.

Then, there's some growing sports. There's lacrosse that has a professional league now. There's women's soccer, and you mentioned esports. How about other opportunities, adventure-based sports, or outdoor sports? Is there a growing field of places that sports management majors can go?

Jason: Absolutely. If we think about the pursuit of sport as a business, we see everything from those adventure-based sports to some of our outdoor recreation opportunities that turn into sport venues. Those core skills that Muralee was just articulating, that our talented faculty, also Sue Myrden is teaching the sport marketing class.

Those skills that they're teaching how to activate sponsors, how to do facilities management, how to think about the business of sport, allow us to train students to participate in a wide variety of different industries and feel confident that they have a skill set that will allow them to adapt to any one specific context, but still run a successful sport business.

Ron: Muralee, UMaine obviously has the only Division 1 athletics program in the state and several high-profile sports. Can you talk about the collaboration with the Black Bears program? What advantages might that bring?

Muralee: Collaboration started from day zero when Ken Ralph, the new athletic director, came on board. We asked [indecipherable 10:42] to join the planning committee for the degree, and he has been with us 120 percent. I just met with him last week to discuss in detail about this Sport Practicum course, for example.

One of the things that we're going to do with that program, Black Bears, is bigger infusion, as you know, of tremendous amount of funds to change the landscape of sports within the UMaine community.

We need to build a lot of things. New pictures, new facility. This is a tremendous opportunity for our students in this Sports Practicum Sports Management major to work with the Black Bears in that way.

Equally, we would like Ken and his team to be participating in teaching some of the elective subjects, for example, because that's how the students get immersed in talking to a subject matter experts, not only within faculty, but people who work for sports on a daily basis.

Faculty, like myself, and Susan Myrden, and a couple of other people, we have worked in sports and then became academics and do consulting. People like Ken Ralph, that's his day-to-day focus. We would like him to be part of this, and he is.

Ron: Jason, what is the feedback been like from students who are interested in this particular major? Are UMaine student-athletes one of the key groups that are going to be interested in this new major, do you think?

Jason: I have no doubt that UMaine student-athletes will be one of our core groups. As soon as the major was approved by the University of Maine system, they wanted a little one-pager to put in front of student-athletes the next day.

They were ready. They've been hearing about this. We have student-athletes asking all the time. When I give tours to student-athletes, it's one of the things that I promote. We're expecting and are already hearing that this is a much broader set of interests. It's not just students who are joining the University of Maine and are playing Division 1 or club athletics.

There is a whole group of students who are deeply passionate about sport and excited about the opportunity to learn more about the business of sports and how they can plug into that.

We expect that we will see not only those student-athletes, but a broad cross-section. The major has not yet even been in the catalog, so to speak, for 60 days, and yet, we already have double-digit majors declared. Students that have enrolled in Muralee's class, they're juniors, they're seniors, they're first-year students.

They're declaring the major. They're saying, "I want to graduate with this degree before it's even a semester old." It's really where we anticipate that the demand will only explode from here.

Ron: The ink isn't even dry yet, and here you go. That's great. Muralee, can you talk about the collaboration with the University of Southern Maine, which already has a program in place. How is that going to work?

Muralee: We recognize and respected USM, University of Southern Maine, from day one again, knowing that they've been in this game of offering sports. I don't know why I used the word game because you're talking about sports management, [laughs] obviously.

We went down to see them. We discussed with them and said, "Look, we got a unique target market here. Like what Jason said, we are a D1 school. Our athletes actually want a program where we couldn't offer a program and that's why hence we're offering a program."

Our athletes are not the only target market we have. Like USM, we also receive a lot of international students who want to come to our flagship university in Maine, Orono, especially from the Far East, like South Korea, for instance. They're very keen to do programs like sports major because US sports is big.

If they graduate here and go back to Korea and Japan and China, pretty much their currency of their degree is strong, but we don't offer that. I actually sit in the Office of International Programs Advisory Board. I will often take calls on the center saying, "Do we have a sports major program? When are we going to offer it?"

We have a chance to attract these students to come to our flagship because we have the program. We explained this to USM and said, “We can work together, but this is where we are going so there’s no much overlap.”

Now there’s overlap because they have the Maine Law School over there, and a few years ago, I talked to the law school dean to offer sports law. That means business school go teach with them over there. This is a very good opportunity now that we have the program to go back and revisit those collaboration.

Ron: Jason, maybe you could put this into a little bit of context for us. We all know sports is a big business in this country. Is this one of the fastest-growing fields for people interested in pursuing a business career? How does it fit into the big picture of how business majors places they can go to do what they want to do?

Jason: It’s a field where there is enormous job growth and opportunity. I don’t think that it’s necessarily one of the biggest majors, nor is it going to displace the broad industries that are finance or accounting or marketing.

It is a rapidly growing field with increasing headcount. Some of the statistics that we pulled down when we were talking and sharing the opportunities that exist here is that this is a \$1.3 trillion industry globally.

It employs hundreds of thousands of people at all different levels of sport and engages hundreds of millions and probably billions of people on a weekly basis as fans and engaged in the broad business of sport, whether it’s customers or those that are offering the thing. We are seeing that this is a strong opportunity.

There are demands in the field for sport management majors and people with training in the field of sport that are not being filled now. There are strong job prospects for students, especially as we broaden and provide them with a well-rounded internationally relevant training in sport management.

Muralee: I’m excited to share some more things that are based on your question. The US has got a very huge professional sports league out here. We got four major leagues, and thank you, Jason, for bringing soccer in it at the very beginning because I’m a big soccer fan. I used to work in soccer.

Jason: I heard your criticism about my previous talks, and I got it. I recognize it’s the biggest industry by the number of fans globally.

Muralee: Thank you. Jason.

Jason: I have now internalized that.



Muralee: He's publicly recognized that. Thank you. Ron, I want to get back to the fact that because we are so busy with the existing sports, the media forgot that in the next seven years, the US will host, obviously, the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles, which is the biggest year in sports event.

Then two years before that, 2026, we're going to host the second biggest sports event, which is the FIFA World Cup. Not the America's, but the rest.

Why I'm saying that is usually in any country where you have those kind of events, the industry just grows hugely, massively because you have to get ready for the event. You put in resources and so on. We already have the good leagues, and then we have these two things coming about. The whole decade is going to be a lot of jobs, and jobs that come in different ways.

The last thing I want to add to that is because of those things, many companies will realize if they never were involved in leveraging sports, how could they leverage sports? One good example is Goldman Sachs. Two years ago, they saw that, "Look, all those athletes in the US don't manage their wealth properly. How do we help them?" Goldman Sachs is a dedicated sports athlete wealth management sector, hiring ex-professional athletes to manage it.

They themselves have done their research and realized, "Got to leverage this." There's hundreds of other companies that are not in sports leveraging sports. That's where the jobs are, too.

Ron: Anybody who's seen the hit show "Ted Lasso" on Apple TV knows that the beautiful game soccer, as it's known here, of course, football over in the UK, knows that is a very big sport, indeed. Has this discussion and this happening led to taking the lid off other discussions about other focus areas for business students?

It would seem in a way that Maine would be a great place to study environmentally-based businesses and careers, recreation-based businesses and careers. Are those discussions happening? Where else might this go? What other focus areas might arise out of this?

Jason: We've got the evolution, really, of two different tracks. We are in early discussions around the additional ability to build specialization in information systems as a major around particularly security management.

We've all, I'm sure, seen the news about all of the cyber security threats, the phishing attacks, and all of the ransomware stuff that's happening. There's really a national epidemic there. Faculty in the business school are working to put together a proposal for that. That is started and in process.

Then we're additionally seeing the opportunities to open up new specialized concentrations in the Maine MBA. There is a whole variety of specializations that exists in the MBA. Very similar to the undergraduate degree that we've just been talking about in sport management, where a core MBA set of content is delivered, and then there's a three-core specialization.

We have concentrations in the MBA that exist in everything from healthcare management, to sustainability, to global policy, to outdoor industry recreation, nonprofit management.

We do see, and we value those opportunities to provide a specialized opportunity to study that dial students in on some of the very specific contextual needs of participating in one field or another as long as we're always building on that strong business backbone.

Ron: If you had to go back 20 years, and then think about what business education is like now or what the Maine Business School is like now, how different is it going back, I'd say 20 or 25 years? Would somebody back then even recognize what the business education looks like today, or is it a natural progression and it's evolved into this?

Jason: At some level, it's recognizable. The field of business has been evolving for since the time of Adam Smith and has been increasingly systematized and made to be more scientific and intentional for quite some time now.

Yet, the incredible faculty that have been able to and have chosen to join the University of Maine in the Maine Business School have started to push the boundaries of how do we think about business education, how do we make sure that we're delivering high-impact teaching practices, engaged experiences that are adaptive to context.

Muralee and Sue with sport management, information systems faculty, the finance faculty, we just had a conversation with some of the accounting faculty yesterday, looking at how do we serve our students well. Recognizing that we need to do the core of business well, but we also want to provide them with a clear pathway and an opportunity to pursue their interests and give them a leg up.

Opportunities like what Muralee is doing with this sport management practicum, I never had an opportunity like that when I got my undergraduate business degree. How transformative that is to be able to take a project that I worked on for a live organization and say, "All right, I would like a job. Here's an example of the work that I can do for a world-class organization that needed support."

Ron: Muralee, one of the things about being a sports fan, you mentioned you're a big soccer fan, is passion. Where does that fit into the equation? People invest their lives and so much into sports sometimes. Maybe a little bit too much sometimes. Does that enter into the equation of what people pursue for a career, and passion becomes part of that, too?

Muralee: For me, I've lived that. I was a soccer fan who ended up working for a soccer organization for a decade. I remember early part, I was looking for the check at the end of the month because you think it's another job. Later on, the checks came, the bonuses came, the compensation [laughs] came, but you were traveling all over the world.

Soccer became important. Sports was your life. Your family revolves around sports already. Now you go to other countries. You think of the sports event first, the event in Japan, and then you bring the family for a vacation there instead of vacation first, and [laughs] then the event.

When I teach the classes, I tell the students that, I say that, "There's two paths you can take. You can go to the sports industry, or you can actually work in another business which leveraging sports." The example I gave earlier. By the end of the day, like anything in life, sports is very passionate, what you call, pathway, but it is a little bit different from other things.

If you a LA Galaxy fan for soccer MLS, even if you are [indecipherable 24:38] fan, very rarely would you change because your team was losing. You would be a die-hard fan to the very end unless you are very strategic with your friends and changed in [indecipherable 24:49] to winning games. That's very rare. That's one of the things that speaks of passion in sports. We are there from day one to the day we go.

Sports has that ability to hook you in. You talk about all the players as if they were your family. You know their stats better than your family's stats sometimes. [laughs] Not the immediate family, the other relatives and so on. You're right. In that sense, I agree totally.

[background music]

Muralee: I tell the students that, and they buy in because they are taking the sports courses because of that. They are fans too.

Ron: I'm recalling one of the lines from a character in that show "Ted Lasso" when he says, "Football is life."

Muralee: Yes. [laughs] I agree.

Ron: We wish you all a much success. It sounds like you guys are on a great path here. We thank you for sharing your story with us.

Muralee: Thank you, Ron. Thank you for having us.

Jason: Thank you. This is great.

Ron: Thanks for tuning us in. You can find us in a number of spots, Apple and Google Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, and SoundCloud, as well as UMaine's Facebook and YouTube pages. Get in touch with any questions or comments at [mainequestion@maine.edu](mailto:mainequestion@maine.edu). This is Ron Lisnet. We'll catch you next time on The Maine Question.

*The University of Maine in Orono is the flagship campus of the University of Maine System, where efforts toward racial equity are ongoing, as is the commitment to facing a complicated and not always just institutional history. The University recognizes that it is located on Marsh Island in the homeland of the Penobscot nation, where issues of water and its territorial rights, and encroachment upon sacred sites, are ongoing. Penobscot homeland is connected to the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations — the Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac — through kinship, alliances, and diplomacy. The university also recognizes that the Penobscot Nation and the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations are distinct, sovereign, legal and political entities with their own powers of self-governance and self-determination.*