

**Football (Soccer?) on campus. Examining the historical development and promotional impact of the world's most popular sport through transatlantic university comparisons.**

## **Introduction**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – Football is the world's most popular sport and its role on campus is of interest to university PR and management professionals tasked with operations, promotions, and reputation management. The purpose of the study is to explore similarities and differences in the structure and promotion of football on campus in the US and the UK.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors completed this case study research by focusing on two related cases using cross-case pattern identification. Consistent with case study research, data collection methods were combined. Depth interviews with PR and management professionals at US and UK universities, were supported by archived documents, published media, and social media accounts.

**Findings** – Football maintains a high level of popularity among students on campus, but each country's approach reveals different models and competitive market forces. In the US, Varsity football faces competition from popular revenue-producing sports (e.g., American football, men's basketball), but growth in the overall game, which is assisted by international influences, indicates future advancement opportunities. In the UK, football is the dominant campus sport with unique ties to professional football and high growth potential for the women's game. The lack of a fan-based model indicates the possibility for structural change, but stiff competition exists with the historically popular and well-developed professional game.

**Originality** – Sports PR research using the case model with professional teams has been conducted, but the authors found no published PR research comparing the structure and promotion of football at US and UK universities. The outcomes can help with future research inquiries and theory development, and are instructive for professionals working in the field.

## **Introduction**

Football is widely accepted as the world's most popular sport, a title that has endured for decades (e.g., Sindreu, 2021; Vecsey, 1970). Not surprisingly, this has resulted in the sport's inclusion and development on university campuses around the world. In the United States, where football has historically lagged in popularity compared to other sports (e.g., American football, men's basketball), university champions have still been recognized at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I level since 1959. In England, the university champion is a more recent phenomenon, having first been awarded by the British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS) League in 2005. Notwithstanding the recent creation of a UK university championship, participation is already high with over 450 teams competing in 100 leagues. This makes it the largest sport in UK higher education.

The structure and development of football on university campuses can vary significantly around the world. For example, in the US higher education system, a two-tiered system has evolved over time. A small number of students compete as varsity athletes. These athletes are recruited to attend the university specifically to participate in the sport. Team rosters typically have around 28-32 athletes, and it is increasingly common to recruit athletes from around the world to fill roster spots. The athletes are typically supported by partial athletic scholarships. Full scholarships are rare due to the limited number available; the

NCAA caps the maximum scholarships per university at 9.9 at the Division I level, and 9 at the Division II level (“How do you get a scholarship”). More than 200 teams currently compete for national championships at both the Division I and Division II levels. Teams will play a 15-20 match schedule, with additional league tournament and playoff matches at the end of the season based on team performance. The matches are promoted to fans within and outside of the universities, and supported by full-time staff members charged with promoting the sport. The top 30 men’s teams in the US typically attract between 1,000-3,000 fans per match (“Men’s soccer attendance records,” 2021), and the top 30 women’s teams typically attract 835-2,500 fans (“Women’s soccer attendance records,” 2021).

The other tier of football on US campuses includes Intramural and club football. Intramural programs are a version of recreational football, open to all students on campus who elect to participate, and students compete against teams from the same university. Club football teams are slightly more competitive, often competing against teams at other universities, but the athletes are responsible for a majority of organizational needs and financial commitments. Full-time staff support at this level focuses primarily on attracting participants and organizing a match schedule.

Conversely, in the UK, football on campus is incredibly popular, but the overall focus is on participation sport versus events that attract fans. Students compete at two different levels. Performance teams are for the top athletes on campus but, unlike in the US, these athletes are not typically recruited using athletic scholarships, although some financial support may exist through sports scholarships (“Rewarding your sporting talents,” n.d.). Athletes show up at open tryouts – often hundreds of students competing for 8-12 open spots – for a chance to play on the top campus team. If selected, they then represent the university

playing matches against other schools across the country. In the US, Varsity athletes are coached by employees of the university. In the UK, Performance athletes are sometimes coached by employees of local professional clubs.

The second UK campus level is Participation football, which is equivalent to Intramural in the US. Groups of friends or housemates get together to compete against fellow students for a chance to win a campus championship.

In this popular sport environment, opportunities exist to help a university's overall brand in a variety of ways. In the US, successful athletic programs have helped generate revenue through merchandise and ticket sales and media packages (Fulks, 2002). Of the three revenue streams, media broadcasting rights are the most important, with massive increases for big conferences that negotiate the rights and share the revenue among member schools (Blinder & Draper, 2022). While American football is the primary driver of the media deals, all other sports sponsored by the conference are included, providing benefits to smaller sports as well (Blinder & Draper, 2022). Programs have also been shown to increase student applications and alumni contributions (Grimes & Chressanthis, 1994; Toma & Cross, 1998). The potential influence of sports for universities is great enough that a number of schools have even tried to develop athletic programs as a way to improve the university's brand identity (Judson & Carpenter, 2005).

Public relations plays a key role in helping universities develop, grow, and promote sports on campus. Football programs, along with other sport offerings, are promoted by full-time campus employees working in sports PR. In the US, these professionals have traditionally been labeled sports information directors (Brown & Isaacson, 2017), although a variety of related

terms are used as well (e.g., athletic communications, communications). In the UK, professionals may hold titles related to department head or director of sport/campus sport.

In this research paper, we explore the role and promotion of football on campus by focusing on universities in two key markets: the US, home to the world's largest sport market; and the UK, home of the world's top football league. In this context, we consider how football has been used by universities. In particular, we focus on football promotion, consider the impact on students, and compare its structure on campus.

### **Literature Review**

**Sports Public Relations.** Since earlier published book chapters and journal articles noted the overall lack of research in the field of sports public relations (e.g., Isaacson, 2010; L'Etang, 2006; Neupauer 2001), the volume of research has been increasing. An extensive review by Brown and Isaacson (2017) covers some of the growth areas, including the role of public relations in sport, sports information in university sport, image repair and crisis communication, and corporate social responsibility.

Specifically on university campuses, research exploring sports PR has reported on demographic information for sports information professionals in the field (Harden & McClung, 2002), differences among PR professionals working at large or small universities (Neupauer, 1999), and perceptions of sports information work by athletic directors (Pratt, 2013; Stoldt et al., 2001). Overall, however, research on PR roles in university athletics remains an understudied topic (Pratt, 2013).

Academic work examining PR and football exists, though also on a small scale, with the most common method being the development of a case study involving a single professional club (e.g., Jensen & Sosa, 2008; Xifra, 2008). Coombs and Osborne (2012) used the case method to

evaluate the public relations efforts of Aston Villa Football Club after it was purchased by an American owner, Randy Lerner. The club was found to have taken steps to strengthen community ties through transparency and engagement, manage internal relations, and develop and launch a new brand identity. A noteworthy finding was the team's effort to focus on improving the fan experience, which the authors labeled as "more reflective of an American approach to sport marketing" (Coombs & Osborne, 2012, p. 219). Manoli (2016) expanded beyond a single case by researching the English Premier League and crisis communication strategies. The study included depth interviews with senior communications professionals working for a broad range of the clubs.

No published research was found by the authors that explored football at universities through the lens of public relations.

**Theory.** Brown and Isaacson (2017) argue that public relations theories are underutilized in sports PR research. One of four theories presented as potentially applicable that fits best for this research is relationship management (Ledingham, 2003). Bruning and Ledingham (2000) argued that the relationship management perspective shifts the PR field from manipulating public opinion to messages and behaviors that build and maintain mutually beneficial organization-public relationships. This shift helps build trust and, over time, a level of loyalty by key publics.

The application of relationship management in sport makes intuitive sense, where both sport participants and spectators are sought, not for a single experience, but for repeated interactions and experiences, often over multiple years and sometimes even extending over decades. Indeed, Wilson et al. (2008) argue, related to relationship management in sport, that

“an effective public relations strategy focusing on building strong relationships with various publics and stakeholders is crucial for a sporting organization” (p. 100).

In Coombs and Osborne’s Aston Villa case study (2012), relationship management is one of the frameworks used for exploring meaning in the data. The authors explain that the qualitative case isn’t intended to test the theory, but instead it’s used to help organize and understand the data. A similar approach is used by the authors of this study.

## **Methods**

The purpose of this case study is to explore the structure, promotion, and impacts of the world’s most popular sport on campus in two different countries. The international comparisons between a US university, in one of the world’s largest sport markets, and a UK university, in the country with the world’s top professional football league, allows for the identification of similarities and differences that can inform PR practice. In this context, a case method is useful for learning from best practices, both expected and unanticipated (Stake, 1995). The inclusion of two related cases for comparison using cross-case pattern identification can help with the development of new categories and concepts (Eisenhardt, 1989), the results of which can be used for future research in the field.

To gather the primary information for this research paper, the authors followed a common approach to case study research by combining data collection methods (Eisenhardt, 1989). We used archived documents, depth interviews, published media content, and a limited number of personal observations based on direct experience with the profiled universities. The resulting analysis combines both qualitative and quantitative data.

Archived documents were accessed through the university websites, league, or association websites (e.g., US – Big Ten Conference, NCAA; UK – BUCS), social media

accounts associated with the programs, and published media content. Four primary depth interviews were conducted with professionals associated with public relations and business management of the university soccer teams and programs in May and June 2022. Two additional interviews, conducted with a senior administrator in the US university's athletic department and a public relations representative of another university (selected due to recent team success winning the NCAA Division I men's championship), helped provide supporting context for the case information and future research.

At a large Midwestern public university in the United States, two public relations/management staff members were interviewed. One interviewee works primarily with the men's and women's NCAA Division I Varsity soccer teams, and the other manages and promotes the university's Intramural soccer leagues. At a mid-sized public university in southern England, two promotion/management staff members were interviewed. One interviewee works primarily with the Performance football teams, and the other manages and promotes the university's Participation football leagues.

The four types of leagues are analogous with each other. The closest representation of an American NCAA varsity team in the United Kingdom is a Performance team, and the closest representation of an American campus Intramural league in the UK is a Participation league. Although the two universities selected varied in size – approximately 50,000 total students at the US university compared to approximately 17,000 total students at the UK university – both are typically ranked between 25<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> in each respective country's rankings for overall university sport success (“About performance sport,” n.d.; “Best college athletic programs,” n.d.). In addition, the universities are remarkably close in size with their



varsity vs. performance sports offerings (23 in the US compared to 22 in the UK), and total number of varsity vs. performance athlete (nearly 900 in the US compared to 835 in the UK).

The two universities selected are similar to many others across the country with their football offerings. The Midwestern university is one of 212 to offer an NCAA Division I men's varsity team, one of 348 to offer an NCAA Division I women's varsity team, and aligned with most universities by offering Intramural football. The southern England university has men's and women's Performance teams participating among 500 teams in the BUCS system.

## **Results**

The results of this case study are organized around four primary themes that emerged from the research. The themes are presented in a manner that first provides context and structure, before discussing promotional efforts (e.g., public relations, social media) and a key unique aspect of each university, and then concludes with fandom and campus impacts.

### ***Football's campus popularity and global influences***

The global popularity of football appears to be consistent with the sport's popularity on campus. From the UK, the Performance football interviewee stated, *"It's the biggest sport on campus and, even beyond, across the country as well."* This sentiment was echoed by the Participation football interviewee, when he said, *"From a male perspective, football is No. 1, and the women's game is building. This is consistent in both Participation and Performance football."* On campus in the US, interestingly enough, the Intramural interviewee shared, *"It's our largest Intramural sport on campus during the fall semester."* During the winter semester, the total number of students playing basketball slightly exceeded football, which is

played during the fall semester only, but in recent years the two sports take turns as the most popular campus sport.

Consistent at both universities, the English Premier League is the most popular professional league among students, and seems to influence students and staff alike. The Participation football manager said, *“They all talk about football. There’s banter on the Facebook groups with it. They’re in it because they love football, playing it, spectating or watching – whether it’s a Champions League Final, an England friendly, or a weekly Premier League game.”* The EPL’s structure is even creatively applied as a model for the Participation league on campus in the UK.

The NCAA Varsity interviewee added her perspective with the following comment:

*The expansion of EPL coverage here in the US helps the game grow and helps the college game as well. It’s helping the growth of the youth game in Michigan and the summer camps on campus are growing as well. We get up at 7 a.m. on the weekends to watch our team. It’s really helping the game.*

The Intramural interviewee confirmed that the EPL was the most popular league among students, then added, *“Yes, you see a ton Arsenal and Man United jerseys and a lot of the teams name themselves after those teams. Man Chest Hair United is a very popular soccer name that seems to appear every year.”*

A review of team documents publicizing the US university varsity athletes produced additional references. One of the team’s former players played a single season in Major League Soccer (MLS) following his collegiate career. While with the MLS team, it played a friendly against Manchester City in July 2010. About the match, the player said, *“Playing against Manchester City was an absolute dream come true. I was able to step on the pitch*

*against world-class players ... It was a great learning experience and a game that I will never forget*" (Spartans in the pros, n.d.). Another male athlete participated in the 2012 Manchester United Premier World Cup in China as a high school athlete, a fact highlighted in team documents (e.g., Shammass, 2019). Numerous athletes played for youth teams in the US named after EPL teams, and athletes from other sports on campus (e.g., field hockey) occasionally name EPL teams as their favorite professional team.

Beyond the EPL, several additional European influences are impacting the US soccer market. First, club academies for the sport are playing an increasingly important role. The NCAA Varsity interviewee said, *"College soccer recruiting is changing so much. A lot of kids aren't even playing at their high school, they're playing at academies. A lot of the best college players are playing at MLS academies."* This shift toward an academy model is one that has long impacted football – and who plays it on campus – in the UK. The Performance football manager explained, *"One of the biggest differences compared to the US, is the best footballing environment in the country wouldn't be at a university because our clubs are so structured."*

Second, competition for US Varsity athletes is expanding to international locations. Increasingly, NCAA teams are recruiting outside of the United States. The impact was described by the NCAA Varsity interviewee, when she said, *"We have one of the least international rosters in the Big Ten. ... We definitely see an international flavor in our conference and across college soccer; it's becoming an international game. Success comes from getting kids to come from around the world."* The US men's soccer team for her university had three international recruits among 28 athletes on the team. To illustrate her point, the NCAA Division I champion in 2022 had 13 international athletes and the winner

the year before had seven. Increasingly, international coaches in the US university market are leveraging connections to recruit from all around the world.

Third, both varsity and intramural athletes are being coached more often by qualified European coaches *before* coming to campus. One of the authors has seen firsthand the coaching influence at Midwestern US youth tournaments, where urban teams commonly hire international coaches. Some of these coaches are certified based on UK requirements, and others have even participated as athletes in prior World Cups. As of 2023, the minor-league professional football club located nearest the US university has a head coach and assistant coach that both have experience working with professional football teams in the UK (“Technical Staff,” n.d.).

It is noteworthy that while this paper is focused specifically on football, both universities included in the case have extensive and varied sport offerings for students. The Midwestern US university has 23 varsity sports and nearly 900 varsity athletes, and offers 10 intramural sports and additional fitness classes for a program that is one of the largest in the United States (“Athletics and Recreation”). The Southern UK university offers 22 performance sports for 835 performance athletes, and 51 different participation sports and fitness offerings (“Campus Sport”).

### *Campus participation*

**UK university Performance football.** The Southern UK university has two Performance teams for men, each with approximately 36 student-athletes. Women have one performance team and a development squad. Due to a unique partnership with the city’s Premier League football club, athletes on these teams are coached by the EPL club’s coaches. For men, open spots on the teams are filled following two weeks of trials at the start

of each academic year. According to the Performance football interviewee, approximately 400 male athletes typically show up for around 10 open spots. The women's trials take place during a three-day period.

Athletes selected for the teams represent the university British Universities and College Sports (BUCS) leagues and competitions. The university supports these athletes by providing a team kit and transportation to away matches. Athletes train twice per week with matches on most Wednesdays throughout the academic year. The Performance teams play across the British Isles; about 50 percent of matches are in the south of England, but teams also travel to Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. Athletes are not typically participating in campus football as a path to future professional careers. As the women's game continues to evolve in the UK, some female university athletes have transitioned to play in the local Premier League club's development team.

**US university Varsity football.** The Midwestern US university has one men's and one women's NCAA Division I Varsity team. The men's team has 28 student-athletes and the women's team has 32. Coaches are employed full-time by the university, and each team has a head coach, two assistant coaches, and a volunteer assistant coach. Most often, athletes are recruited by the coaches and chose to attend the university to participate on the team. Athletes are supported financially with partial scholarships at a variety of levels. The men's team divides 9.9 scholarships and the women's team divides 14 scholarships among each team's respective roster. The teams participate in the Big 10 Conference and, if teams qualify for the playoffs at the end of the season, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I playoffs and College Cup. The teams play primarily in the Midwestern United States but occasionally travel across the country to non-conference or playoff

matches. Athletes are supported in a variety of ways. Team gear and transportation to away matches is provided. Athletes are frequently provided food. This can be training tables after matches or practice, or a campus fueling station that is constantly available and supported by a university-employed nutritionist. Top athletes are occasionally drafted by Major League Soccer (MLS) or National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) teams and will compete to try to earn roster spots.

**UK university Participation football.** The Southern UK university began offering Participation football programs – the university's most popular sport offering – when the Participation manager was hired in 2012 using funding provided by Sport England through an Active Universities sport initiative. This was part of a broad initiative impacting many universities across the country. When an initial four-year funding cycle ended, the manager was hired directly by the university.

The EPL was used to develop the structure of the men's campus leagues for around 1000 participants. After completing an initial set of matches in the fall, teams were divided into three leagues – Premiership, Championship, and League One – to maintain competitive levels among the teams. The top teams from each division then qualify for a Cup tournament at the end of the year. In the 2021-22 academic year, 22 men's 11-a-side teams averaged 18-20 athletes per team. An additional 50 teams played 5-a-side football. A separate women's football club operates through the university's student union and has around 70 participants.

**US university Intramural football.** The Midwestern US university has offered Intramural football programs for a lengthy but undetermined length of time, estimated to be decades by the Intramural manager. It's the most popular Intramural sport offering during the fall semester, with 2314 students participating during the fall semester 2019. (Basketball is

the most popular winter semester sport with 2400 participants.) The participants were spread among 250-275 teams playing 9-a-side. Exact numbers of male and female participants were not available but CoRec (mixed male-female teams) was the most popular offering. Teams self select if they will participate in competitive or recreational leagues.

### *Public relations efforts and reputation influences*

**Traditional PR Tactics.** The Intramural and Participation football programs tend to operate with fewer full-time staff, and are instead supported with part-time staff and students. Both managers shared in interviews that they take advantage of in-person campus events (e.g., student orientations, semester welcome events) for recruitment, and that they'll reach out directly to students in residence halls or via email. The Intramural manager added, however, that, *"The No. 1 recruiter that we have in Intramural sports is word-of-mouth. Players that play recruit other students. That's the primary way the program builds."* The Participation manager has taken advantage of new technology to creatively enhance the student experience. For example, to announce the Cup draws for the final tournament, he used Facebook Live and achieved high levels of involvement and interaction with teams in the tournament.

**Social media promotion.** At the US university within the athletic department, the men's and women's varsity teams regularly use social media to promote the teams. From each team's website, links are included for Twitter and Facebook accounts. Both teams also have Instagram accounts, but only the women's Varsity team has a link to its Instagram account included on the website.

In June 2023, the men's Varsity team Twitter account had 11,700 followers. Recent tweets on the account were a combination of team promotions, athlete achievements, other

university team promotions, and academic events (e.g., graduation, end of the semester).

During a month-long period since the academic year ended in May 2023, the account had seven tweets, six of which were retweets or comments added to a tweet, and one was original content from the team account. All of the tweets included graphic visual content (e.g., photo, video, GIF). At the same time, the men's team Facebook account had 6,900 likes and 7,100 followers. This account was used less frequently with two posts in the same month period. The content was the same as that posted on the team's Twitter account. The team's Instagram account is its most popular social platform with 12,400 followers. The graphics are the same as those used on the other accounts, but the interaction is much higher with likes in the hundreds and sometimes thousands.

In June 2023, the US women's Varsity team Twitter account had 13,200 followers. Recent tweets to the account were similar to the men's Varsity team, with the addition of posts promoting an alumnus playing in the National Women's Soccer League. During a month-long period since the academic year ended in May 2023, the account had 20 tweets; 12 were retweets or comments added to a tweet, and eight were original content from the team account. The original content included past player awards, current player news, and promotion of upcoming youth camps. Nineteen of the 20 tweets included graphic visual content (e.g., photo, video, GIF). The women's team Facebook account had 3,800 likes and 4,300 followers. This account was used less frequently with nine posts in the same month period. The majority of the content was the same as that posted on the team's Twitter account, with the exception of one unique post. The team's Instagram account is its most popular social platform with 15,100 followers. The graphics are the same as those used on



the other accounts, but the interaction is much higher with likes in the hundreds and sometimes thousands.

The US university Intramural programs are not promoted with individually branded social media accounts. Instead, the recreational sports department operates social media accounts that promote a wide variety of sport and fitness opportunities on campus, including football. The account followings are much smaller than the Varsity team accounts, with 2,600 followers on Facebook, 2,250 on Instagram, and 840 on Twitter.

The UK university also operates social media accounts to help promote football on campus. The Participation football leagues are promoted through social media links on the university's website. Public Facebook groups exist for different types of teams; the 5-a-side group has 1,400 followers, and the 11-a-side group has 1,800 followers. Posts tend to be primarily of two types: informational by university staff members during the season, and students posting for other students to recruit or join teams. A university sport Twitter account (2,675 followers) promotes all types of campus sport and recreation, and it occasionally includes football in promotions for campus leagues.

In June 2023, the UK university men's Performance football team had 170 followers on its Twitter account. The only recent tweet was a retweet of a video from a player on the team. Prior to that, the account had not been used for a 3-month period. During the academic year, it was used most often to direct viewers to the team's Instagram page, its most popular social platform with 600 followers. The Instagram page is focused mainly on match promotion with posted lineups and match times/locations, and appears to be used mostly during the academic year and match season, with no new posts for six weeks leading up to June 2023.

In June 2023, the UK university women's Performance football team had 320 followers on its Twitter account. The account has not posted new content since May 2020. Instead, the team promotes using its Instagram page, which has 520 followers. Posting frequency is limited, with two posts in the last two months leading up to June 2023.

An additional UK university promotion related to women's football appears through the local English Premier League women's team. The team's Instagram account has nearly 4,000 followers and regularly posts content. In the vast majority of the photos during the prior season, the university logo is featured prominently on the front of the jerseys and team gear. The EPL men's team, for comparison, moves into a different sport market altogether with 711,000 Instagram followers. In early May and again in early June 2023, posts including athletes from the women's team were jointly posted on the men's account.

**Unique US university athletic department support.** One of two key differences between the universities, is the US varsity teams' inclusion in the greater athletic department. This department includes over 200 staff members that support 23 Varsity teams. This produces shared resources that benefit the men's and women's football teams in coaching, strength and conditioning, athletic training, nutrition, academic advising, athletic communications, marketing, brand development, creative video and social media promotion.

An athletic communications staff member, interviewed for this project, explained the support role her office provides for the teams. The office includes 14 full-time staff members, four graduate assistant interns and numerous undergraduate assistants. Full-time staff typically serve as the primary media contact for two sports with different seasons. She works with football teams in the fall, then transitions to women's basketball in the late fall and winter. In her role, she writes and/or edits team media materials, manages game day

press operations at home matches, and oversees work with the media. City, regional, and university media will regularly cover the teams. Media relations responsibilities include organizing and managing press conferences; coordinating interviews with TV, radio, and print media; and on-site support at major matches and playoff events.

Social media promotion continues to take on an increasingly important role in sport promotion. A senior level athletic communications staff member explained:

*It's a part of everything we do and it requires a clear strategy. You can't be a team and not have a Twitter or Facebook account. It's necessary to engage with fans. It has opened up opportunities in sports to be authentic, often with behind-the-scenes content that's now shared with fans, often in minutes.*

Recognizing and developing good content for social promotion has become a valued skill. Tactical work to assist the teams with social media accounts includes interviewing, editing, and uploading video and gameday graphics.

On a broad level, promotional support comes from the athletic department that enhances and promotes fan engagement at matches (e.g., halftime promotions, giveaways, schedule posters), and efforts to increase fan attendance. The teams also have access to an award-winning creative team that produces videoboard, sports Docu-Series, social media, and conference TV programming (“Spartan Vision”). In competition with local media, regional media, and professional sports organizations, the creative team has regularly been awarded regional media awards (“National Academy of Television – Michigan Chapter”). For example, when the women’s football team had two players selected in the 2023 NWSL draft, the creative team produced a feature with coverage of the team’s draft party (“2023 NWSL Draft – Spartans All Access”).

**Unique UK Premier League partnership.** The other key difference between the two universities is a 10-year partnership between the UK university and the local city's Premier League soccer team. The university is listed on the team's website as one of four official partners, and the university describes it as the "official higher education partner" of the club ("BU and AFC Bournemouth"). The other three partners are MSP Capital, DeWalt, and Umbro. Two other companies are listed as principal partners. Some of the elements of the partnership include collaborative research and community initiatives, player and staff classroom visits, student employment and networking, stadium advertising, local transit advertising, logo placement on youth football program team shirts, and joint support to modern social issues ("BU and AFC Bournemouth," n.d.). An extensive description is available through the university's website.

A variety of collaborative events have been developed through the partnership, ranging from youth football sessions to a special event match on the club's pitch for university staff and their families. Ongoing promotions on campus allow staff to win tickets to attend matches. The Participation football interviewee shared, *"At the end of each season we have the BU Big Match, where all of the staff get the chance to play on Bournemouth's pitch. Through the year there are competitions where staff can win tickets to watch Bournemouth matches."*

Elements of the partnership may be influenced by the club's EPL status, since Premier League clubs receive more money for community initiatives and women's program development. The Performance football interviewee described the EPL impact with the following statement:

*The Premier League have certain initiatives they need to do in local areas so the*

*community sport trust framework is in every Premier League club. They need to have men's and women's program as well as community outreach. That's where our partnership is similar to Solent University and Southampton FC or Swansea University and Swansea City FC, where there's an awful lot of crossover between the two partners.*

Coaching support is provided by the football club for the university's Performance teams. Unlike the US, where coaches are employed by the university, the club employs the coaches and participates through its community sports initiatives. The Performance football interviewee explained, *"Our Premier League team partner has an arm of their business which is community sport. Within it, they have a number of coaches. Through our partnership, their coaches provide the coaching expertise for all of our football program. So, we don't employ them, we have the agreement with the club."* The Participation football interviewee added context when he said, *"Their coaches run all our Performance training sessions and oversee their matches as well."*

The US university has some ties to professional football in the US market, but in a much less formalized manner. For example, the men's varsity team occasionally plays offseason friendly matches against a nearby minor league football club, with some charity and community elements surrounding the match (Maki, 2023).

### ***Fandom and campus impacts***

In the US, at a Varsity level, football is not typically the most popular sport on campus. The US university's most popular sports – by both fan attendance and revenue generated – are men's American football and men's basketball. The American football team has averaged between 70,000-74,000 fans at home games in recent years, and the men's

basketball team regularly sells out its stadium at nearly 15,000 per game. Although many of the fans come from off campus, current students are strong supporters as well. The Varsity football interviewee explained, *“It’s really about men’s basketball and football at our university. That’s what gets students super jazzed to come to a school.”*

In comparison, the varsity men’s football team averages about 1,500 fans per match and the varsity women around 800. The maximum seating capacity in the football stadium, both men and women play at the same facility, is 2,500. Among the students that do attend games, they have undertaken some efforts to improve the overall fan experience. A student-run group has been developed that tries to build fan support with traditions patterned after EPL and MLS fan sections, and it also mimics some of the strategies used by the university’s highly successful student group for men’s basketball. The Intramural manager explained, *“In terms of university Varsity athletics, more students care about the football and basketball team than they do about the soccer team. That’s a direct correlation to what American society is right now. College soccer doesn’t have a strong foothold like college (American) football or college basketball.”*

In the UK, campus sports fandom was summed up with a statement by the Performance sport interviewee who said, *“None of our university sport and not much of it across the UK is fan-based.”* Instead, the fan support that exists is typically pitch-side viewing by friends and housemates, and the infrastructure is not in place for stadium viewing.

A common element shared by the US Varsity and UK Performance programs is that they are not revenue-generating sports for the university. However, the programs can still help support the universities’ overall reputations. For example, in the US, one evaluative

measure of Varsity sport success is the Learfield Directors' Cup, which ranks universities based on performances at NCAA Championships across all sports ("Division I Learfield"). The US university for this case had a decent overall performance in the most recent fall ranking, which includes both of the men's and women's Varsity football seasons. It finished 43<sup>rd</sup> out of more than 150 ranked Division I universities for the 2022 fall semester. Similarly, in the UK, universities are compared and ranked based on overall Performance sport success. The UK university was ranked 35<sup>th</sup> out of 147 universities in the most recent results ("BUCS Points"). The value of these overall rankings was explained by the Participation manager, who said, *"We're aiming to be one of the healthiest universities in the UK. We're successful in BUCS rankings and have high participation numbers. Sport efforts are supported by the leadership at the university, and student experiences with sport can help with student retention at the university."*

At a Participation and Intramural level, the sport is not intended to attract fans but to instead enhance students' outside-of-class experience through active participation. The value to students was described by the managers. The Participation manager, reflecting on his own experience as a student, said, *"I know how the students feel because I played for campus leagues team. As a student, I lived for it on Wednesday afternoon. I loved it, and we'd go out for our big night out afterwards. It's the highlight of their week on Wednesday afternoons."* His prior experience seems to be consistent with current student perceptions. During a conversation with the grandparents of a student following the campus Cup final, they thanked the Participation manager for providing the opportunity (on behalf of the university) and said, *"This is all our grandson has talked about for the last three years."* The Intramural manager explained the value of participating in football by saying, *"It's a staple – meaning*

*it's a foundational aspect of students' university experience. It provides an experience they don't get anywhere else on campus. Helps develop connections on campus and engages them in the university community."*

### **Discussion**

This US-UK university comparison in a real-world setting examining the structure and promotion of football is potentially instructive for academic researchers and the PR and management professionals working in the field. Other researchers have raised the issue of a lack of attention to practitioner perspectives (e.g., Kitchin & Purcell, 2017), and we attempt to begin to address that issue in this paper. As more studies continue to contribute to the knowledge base of sport PR at universities, this improved understanding of PR practice can help further development of PR theory (Brown & Isaacson, 2017).

The US university football programs seem to be practicing the relationship management perspective of PR. The PR staff is helping to produce a wide variety of content, being sent through multiple communication channels, especially among the Varsity teams. Creative promotional content is being produced by the in-house creative team, that is then shared through social media channels and university-owned video distribution. The men's and women's Varsity teams help promote shared content, and the overall focus is on strengthening relationships with key publics (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000).

The UK university football programs may be much younger overall, but the participation and involvement by students is high. The creativity and experience of the staff developing and promoting the football programs results in a high-quality product. Feedback from participants is overwhelming positive and the experience helps strengthen relationships between students and the university, providing valuable long-term public relations benefits



(Grunig, 1992; Ledingham, 2003). Perhaps indicative of football's growth on campus, the Participation football manager shared that UK universities are also visiting each other to learn and share best practices.

Learning from other universities within a country is a great start. Additional research that adds perspectives from other countries can contribute further. Indeed, the interview subjects for this project all expressed a strong interest in receiving the final results. The creativity in designing Participation football in the UK (patterned after professional leagues) is likely to be of interest to Intramural managers in the US. The resource differences between the US and UK universities could result in either: 1) efforts to increase fan participation and revenue generation in the UK, or 2) proposals developed internally that seek to increase key human and financial resources.

The research also showed that opportunities exist on campus – in both the US and UK – for students to gain experience and entry into the sport public relations field. Both universities regularly hire and rely on students to support the public relations and business operations functions associated with their teams. Through personal experience working in sports information and athletic communications at US universities, one of the authors has experienced firsthand the importance of gaining experience while a student. Oftentimes, universities may not even offer classes in sports PR, leaving students wondering how the top positions are obtained. The senior level athletic communications staff member interviewed for this project confirmed – and personally experienced himself – the path from student employee to intern to full-time staff member is common in the field.

**Limitations.** A well-known limitation of case study research is the absence of generalizability, and each case has aspects that are unique to it (Lucas et al., 2018). That

applies in this instance as well. Variance is expected to exist between and among universities and, based on this data, it's not possible to generalize to other universities. However, future survey research could use these results to help with the development of research questions using quantitative methods.

This case also did not delve deeply into social media analysis of the accounts promoting the various football teams. The snapshot review done here is intended to draw some initial comparisons and explore how the accounts appear to be used. An extended review over time with in-season and out-of-season comparisons could be done in future work.

**Future Research.** The comparison of the US and UK universities helped uncover possibilities for future research. Football is popular and well received on campus in both countries but some clear differences deserve more attention. The club football model in the UK, operating outside of universities altogether, should be investigated further. According to both UK university football staff members interviewed, this is where the most talented athletes are developed. Growth and development of the women's game in both countries is worthy of greater attention. In the UK, the women's game has high potential for growth and appears to already be influenced by the recent success of the Lionesses and support from the EPL to expand opportunities.

The unique partnership between the UK university and the city's local Premier League team deserves a closer look. A brief search online shows that many UK professional clubs have higher education partners and some, like Tottenham Hotspur, list a number of higher education and developmental partners ("Tottenham Hotspur player development partners," n.d.). The broad popularity of the EPL could provide opportunities to

communicate with massive global audiences, and the impact of such partnerships on recruiting and brand development ought to be explored. For example, the Participation football manager shared that, *“Our link with AFC Bournemouth is a bit of a draw for students, because the coaches who run our teams (Performance) work for AFC Bournemouth; that partnership is a draw.”* Understanding the overall value of the partnership (i.e., does it help the university recruit students?) could be explored through future research.

Consistent with other areas of public relations, a greater understanding of social media and its effects in sport PR is worthwhile (Brown & Isaacson, 2017). More can be learned about its impact on students, fans, other stakeholder groups using quantitative methods, but additional case studies could also help provide a better understanding of current work in the field. For example, in an effort to properly frame and understand data for this case, we spoke with the PR assistant director working with a US Division I men’s Varsity football team that recently won a national championship. He explained the team’s social media by saying, *“Our biggest marketing tool is our social media, which had over 1 million interactions during the team’s championship year. That was double the team with the second-most interactions. We put a lot into it from a social standpoint.”* Even within the US or UK market, resource differences and earned outcomes are expected to be different between universities, but more research is required to better understand these elements.

Finally, public relations is sometimes criticized for its lack of contribution to business ROI (Watson, 2011). The US and UK professionals interviewed for this case did not share specific financial data with the authors, but indicated that they did not expect that any of their programs operated at a profit for their university. Indeed, this is not an unexpected

finding. In the US market, the university sports earning the most money are American football and basketball (McGinty, 2021). On a regional level in the US, in locations where popularity is high, other sports such as ice hockey and baseball can sometimes generate revenue (Malone, 2022). Football is not typically among the revenue-producing sports, but the global popularity and growth of the game may produce future earning opportunities. Interestingly enough, the PR assistant director interviewed from the recent championship winning team, shared, *“Only some university sports sell tickets, and the rest are free to attend. Sports selling tickets include men’s soccer, (American) football, basketball, baseball and (women’s) softball. Many schools do not sell tickets for men’s soccer, but it’s so popular here, it has become a revenue stream.”* If this instance is part of a trend toward profitability or an outlier is an empirical question to be explored in another research study.

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