Revive the Sport, Rewind the Story: Shaping a Culture for the New Volleyball League

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Recommended Citation

10.15760/honors.673
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by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in University Honors and Graphic Design

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Portland State University

2018
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BACKGROUND

Volleyball is a sport that started off in the United States and has been around for over a hundred years; yet lack of media coverage, sponsorship, and cultural significance has made volleyball a second-tier sport in the minds of many Americans. Over time, there have been multiple efforts in establishing a professional volleyball league in the United States, yet limited financial resources caused an end to those attempts in 1987 and then again in 2002 (Lowery, Merkin). At the beginning of 2017, Jamie Davis, who was previously involved with the sports entertainment industry, became the CEO of USA Volleyball, which gave hope to the professional league restarting sufficiently with Davis’ support and connections. Throughout the year of 2017, Davis has been pushing his goal of establishing the professional league by 2020 Olympics. In his interview he said that he underestimated the potential in the sport before becoming the CEO and from learning more about the organization and people’s involvement he really believes this time USA Volleyball will succeed (Feinswog, “Q&A with USA...”; Fischer). Currently, the non-participating audience simply does not understand the rules and the play. A big factor in making this effort possible is educating the public about the sport, so next time they see a game in action they can comprehend it.
RESEARCH QUESTION:

What is the perception of volleyball and how can it be repositioned to establish volleyball as a professional sport in the United States?
SECONDARY RESEARCH

**Participation & Interest**

As of 2016 in the United States, there are about 5.5 million beach volleyball participants, 6.2 million court volleyball participants and 4.1 million grass volleyball participants (Outdoor Foundation). If the participants are combined, this results in about 15 million participants that is similar to another underrepresented sport in the United States — soccer (football) (Outdoor Foundation). Soccer has gained local Portland attention with Portland Timbers and Thorns (discussed further on pages 14–16), so why can’t a sport of volleyball have a chance at being reintroduced here in Portland? Over the past ten years, the participation rate has been steady, therefore, to increase general interest, there is a need to target groups not currently involved in volleyball or sports in general.

Currently, those interested in volleyball are those connected to the game who are willing to play it, watch it, and talk about it. Many of those who can’t relate to volleyball, just don’t understand it as it “doesn’t fit into the American sports mentality” (Henrique). However, in order to understand the audience that is not easy to reach, one needs to understand the barriers they face trying to connect to the sport.

Participation in sports benefit a range of physical, mental and social health dimensions. Many people formed sport participation barriers at a younger age through past experiences that scarred them for the rest of their lives, isolating those individuals from the benefits of sports. Psychological barriers have been examined in multiple studies where the participants reflected on the participants’ behavior. For example, in Allender’s study, barriers to entry for the teen category were past negative experiences, with a divide of some people wanting to be active and others afraid to appear unattractive to peers. Adults face anxiety paired up with a “lack of confidence about entering an unfamiliar setting,” which contributes to the lack of interest in sports (Allender 831).

External or internally pressuring reasons for non-participation at a young age, caused by PE teachers and peers, have a long-term effect on individuals’ sports lifestyle (Aelterman et al. 144). In addition, gender differences are a factor in evaluating influences of non-participation and participation. A study conducted by Christina Frederick showed that men were more motivated by competition and challenge, while women were driven by social motives (Frederick 124).

An outlook on the sport can be viewed from a health perspective as well. Norma Chew, a retired registered nurse, writes that the sport strengthens cardiovascular and respiratory systems, and speeds up metabolism (Chew). On a larger scale the game influences mental and social health as those who join the team, also...
join a community. If those type of benefits were shared more commonly, there would be a potential to shift opinions on the sport that is considered inferior.

The different outlook on sports as an activity can also be reflecting the interest in sports overall. Cialdini’s principle of liking connects the participation in the sport to viewership, as those observing the game are more likely to connect if they see similarities in the experience (Cialdini 126–157). By having a positive mentality towards the participants and challenging the perceptions, more individuals would have an open mind towards a sport at an older age.

**Volleyball at Professional Level**

At his arrival to the position as CEO, Jamie Davis learned that almost 400 American volleyball players play professionally abroad in 2016, which he called “very strange” and this showed a potential opportunity of establishing a national league (Karmazin). For the season of 2017–18 there are almost 300 men and women signed off to play internationally (Kauffman, “usav Process...”). This shows that less professional level players are interested in pursuing their careers abroad and the need for a domestic league is more desired than ever before.

The living conditions some players are living in are intolerable. A player from Portland, Oregon, Kim Hill, signed off to play in Istanbul and in addition to the difficulties of moving to a new country very different from the U.S. lifestyle, she has to deal with the political unrest in Istanbul. In her interview, Hill mentioned that after the recent terrorist attack her team avoids outings, being in touristy areas and crowded events; thus making her everyday life worrisome and tense (Feinswog, “Q&A with USA...”, “Americans Playing...”). A former U.S. setter and a four-time Olympian states that “if a league were started in usa, many good players including foreigners would feel attracted” thus leading to the question—why has this league not been established sooner? (Henrique).

In the past, there have been two attempts at establishing the national league in 1987 and 2002. The first attempt failed due to the lack of local team sponsors as well as media coverage (Lowery). This league was women-only, which may have played a role in the lack of resources compared to other sports leagues. In the second attempt, investors’ support fell through resulting in another unfinished season. Short after the fall, the league cut down its staff to start off the next season in 2004 but did not have enough public support in the proceeding (Merkin).

Over the year at his position, Davis learned more about USA history and its viewership to find loopholes in why the establishment of professional leagues hasn’t worked in the past. He set a goal of establishing a national league in time in time for the 2020 Olympics, so the Olympic exciting energy carries on for when the season is launched. Davis emphasized in multiple interviews, that the 2016 Olympics streaming was a big success along with membership growth over 2017, therefore, USA Volleyball is confident that this time around the domestic league will succeed, unlike the times in the past (Feinswog, “Q&A with USA...”; Fischer).

Jamie Davis has a past within the sports entertainment, specifically sports, media, marketing, e-commerce and sales, and the connections he developed could help him take the sport to another level (Davis). There has been an increase in viewership of the sport and Davis’ efforts to create more content viewers want to see. In an interview, Davis emphasized that volleyball is the “largest team participatory sport amongst girls in high school <...> [and] amongst women in the NCAA” (Feinswog, “Q&A with USA...”). In addition, volleyball is the “fastest growing boys’ sport” in high school, yet currently on a smaller scale than girls’ volleyball (Feinswog, “Q&A with USA...”).

It is interesting to note that volleyball participation rates reflected the USA Olympics loss in 2012, as male participation that year dropped and picked up back in 2013 across the age groups of 18–24, 25–35, and 45–54 (National Sporting Good Association). This shows a potential correlation between media coverage and participation of volleyball players nationally. Based on an IBIS-World Industry Report from February 2018, National Sporting Goods Association declared that there has been a 16% decline in volleyball participation over the past decade (Rivera). In 2016, there were about 30 million participants ages 12–17 making it the largest age group, yet for the age group 18–24 the numbers were as low as 18.2 million and the amount is even lower for the rest of the age groups (National Sporting Good Association). This raises the need to address the interest of adults 18+ that have the volleyball history to educate those who have not had a chance to be exposed to the sport to engage them in viewership down the road.

**Current Contribution**

Within the first year in his position, Davis sealed a multi-year partnership between the USA Volleyball and Adidas to contribute to the expansion of the sport. Adidas partnership, in the words of Davis, is focused on the retail brand selling gear because they believe in the association (Feinswog, “Q&A with USA...”). The more streamlined the volleyball gear would appear on the shelves, the more consumer awareness the sport would gain. Mark King, Adidas North America president, said in an interview “USA Volleyball is the organization’s passion for the game and its dedication to making the sport more accessible for everyone,” thus showing that his intentions are greater than the financial benefit and his vision aligns with the USA Volleyball (Kauffman, “Adidas and USA Volleyball...”). The intentions of both sides are for the better good of the sport to potentially become tier-one sport in the minds of Americans.
STRATEGY & GOALS

The ultimate goal for this thesis project is to help Davis and the rest of the USA Volleyball team launch the national league successfully. Specifically, this project is aimed to prepare the audience and train them to be the best viewers and volleyball enthusiasts they can be, so when the league games begin there is enough viewership and interest for the league to stay.

A Portland fan club in support of volleyball as a sport is at the core of the solution to this challenge. As mentioned earlier, the national team’s success in Olympics 2016 contributed to the rise in viewership. This is explained by a psychological study that concluded that “team association drive self esteem,” so people are more connected to the players as they want to be associated with the success of others. More importantly, “the need to belong is even more powerful than the desire for self-esteem.”(McConnell). Social connectedness is established through “symbolic affiliations with others,” so an established community at a time when more people peaked interest in the sport with the past Olympics is what will help the league succeed (Gardner).

Looking at the project framework, one can see that online targeted advertisements as well as the USA Volleyball web page would guide the viewer to the fan club’s web page, which would then direct them to the app that is a community space for the club members. The reason why the fan club page is designed desktop first despite the superior mobile usage, is because desktop websites have more engagement— “Search Engine Watch reports that desktop visits last three times longer on average than mobile visits”(Naylor). The New York Times, an information driven website found their readers “spend less than two minutes on the mobile site, compared to 17 minutes on the desktop,” this supports prioritizing the desktop site experience (Naylor).

An online community in the form of an app is important because “mobile phone use was classified into either instrumental or ritualistic motives” and it directly related to the fan team’s loyalty (Kang; Kim et. al.). Users spend a bulk of their internet time in PC and mobile apps, “desktop taking 40%, mobile apps reaching 52% and mobile web with only 8%,” therefore, designing a more controlled user experience through an app as a community space would be more likely to succeed.

Davis, in his interview, mentioned that USA Volleyball currently targets youth and their parents, who often play volleyball themselves, so for this agenda, the target audience is not involved in the sport and do not have kids involved. The audience is outside of the volleyball social circle and might have peaked interest in the past, yet did not understand the game to its full potential before. This project is primarily targeting millennials ages 20-40 living in the Portland area who seek new experiences. Ultimately, the fan club would be for those who share the passion and love for the sport, regardless of whether they’re only viewers or players as well.

PROJECT FRAMEWORK

Advertisements Online
Display advertisements target audience on social media, such as Instagram, based on their past activities.

USA Volleyball Website
A link to the fan web page would be added for those already on the USA Volleyball website looking for more.

Fan Club Website
The fan club’s home base, where one can learn more about the story, game basics, and join the community.

Fan Club App
One-stop for volleyball news, articles, game videos, and potentially information on the league and the players.
CASE STUDIES

Timbers Army

The Portland Timbers have been a local team since 1975, and after the years of hard work have been elevated to Major League Soccer in 2011 (“Timbers Soccer”). To reposition the minds of Portland citizens distant from soccer, the Portland Timbers asked a former executive creative director for Wieden + Kennedy, Jelly Helm, to create a campaign that would capture the team and help them sell more season tickets (Dean).

A campaign featuring average people with chainsaws and axes ended up transforming the vision of soccer in Portland. It was simple yet intriguing, and by involving the community it made a bigger impact giving soccer a new life in Portland.

The fans base that was strengthened following the campaign are known for their loud chants and fans such as Timber Joey (pictured on the right) who slices a piece of lumber every time a team scores a goal (Dean). The campaign was such a success in 2011, the photoshoot was repeated in 2015 for the fifth year anniversary of Portland Timbers in the Major League Soccer (“Portland Timbers to”).

There is no chat feature on the website, yet on the social media channels such as their Facebook page, the fans interact in the comment section in regards to the posts generated by someone who curates the account. Although there are not many posts generated by the fans themselves to start a conversation on the Facebook page, there is self-generated content from the fans on Twitter. Many users post on their own accounts with a hashtag, and some of the posts get retweeted by the Timbers account, but yet again regulated by the Account curator. Since the fan club is focused around watching the sport to learn it better to be prepared for the league, I looked at the Timbers’ Youtube page. The channel has outdated content, with the most recent video being posted two years ago. This might be caused by the lack of interest from the fan side in the content posted.

Having different social media platforms to engage with is great at reaching different audiences, but with the restricting content guidelines one can post to. In the social media channels used right now, the individual(s) behind the Timbers Army social media accounts curates the conversation with the content they choose to post and repost. Potentially, an app would be easier to maintain and post content, letting the fans have their own conversations and sharing content within their social circles, all in one platform.
**Rose City Riveters**

Rose City Riveters is a group in support of "women's professional soccer anywhere in the world," which is similar to what this project is for volleyball ("What are the Rose..."), while they come and support many of the Portland Thorn games, they amaze those coming into the city for a game of how much the support the players get despite being a women's soccer league. In an interview, some of the players say it's even hard to focus sometimes with the mass support they get from the fans and "nothing in the country can compare to the home support given to women's professional soccer in Portland" (Torres). This reciprocates to the Portland Thorns winning more games and getting the fans even more excited.

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**Seattle Seahawks’ 12th Man**

While Seattle Seahawks are a nationally well known team, their fan team—The 12th Man—have set two world records in the past for the noise level of 136.6 and 137.6 decibels at the CenturyLink Field. The term 12th man was originated in football under the Texas A&M team yet has been commonly used for various teams’ fans of American football and soccer. What makes the Seattle Seahawks’ 12th man so unique, is the appreciation of the fans by the team and the loud support in return at home and away games. Throughout the years the team showed appreciation for fans by dedicating the ball to the 12th man during the 2005 game against the New York Giants as well as retiring the jersey with number 12 in honor of the fans back in 1984 (Bien).
SPORTS FAN APPS STUDIES

**ESPN**
This app lets the fans stay in touch with their favorite teams. It does not limit the user to a single league, covers stories and scores, and lets users watch and listen to the matches live from the app.

**Yahoo Sports**
The sections of the app do not engage the viewer as much to the live scores and recent stories. The app is more focused on past established scores and news headlines across different sports.

**Seahawks**
During the onboarding, the app asks the user which kind of a fan they are (season-pass holder, inside or outside U.S. 12), which is unique compared to other apps. Some of the unusual sections are the stadium guide, phone wallpapers for fans, and Seahawks AR camera for fans to be engaged with the brand.

**Apps by Tribune Mobile OOO**
The developer released different apps for individual teams along with a core app for the league. In the league app the fans can look at the general newsfeed, statistics, look at schedule of matches, standings, teams, and chat between each other. Each individual team app has similar characteristics, the main difference is content curated to the specific team, as well as, a more narrower audience.

**Apps by Spontly**
Series of fan apps for the soccer league teams developed by Spontly. It’s not as advanced and well-designed as the Tribune Mobile OOO’s apps but the concept of the app itself has more of a community vibe with the forum section and the ability to comment on the news stories and videos posted.
VISUAL RESEARCH

**Adidas x USA Volleyball**

After partnering with USA Volleyball, Adidas released a campaign in support of the sport alongside its new volleyball apparel section. The majority of the posts were animated or had elements of motion to catch the eye when one is scrolling through an Instagram feed.

**International Campaigns**

The sport of volleyball has been used in different ads to either playfully make a point, or use the athletes as representatives of their brand. Those advertisements that push forward the idea of the game at the core, tend to be more serious and focused on empowering those playing the sport. Visually, the majority of the ads are photo driven, sometimes being playful with the layout.
Implementation

In this stage of the process, the content and visual research is accumulated into the project idea, described in the Strategy & Goals sub-section. In this section, you will see a brief overview of the process. To start off, the tone was established with a set of words, along with a visual representation to reference throughout the project. Then different moodboards were created to explore the different aesthetic directions the project could take. Once a final moodboard was selected, a promo image was developed to establish the final look and feel of the project as a whole. The promo image was an anchor piece, from which the rest of the project was developed visually. The biggest challenge in this section was finalizing the aesthetic. The typeface choice influences the meaning of the project, and with the visual direction I was going for it was challenging to establish a unique combination of elements to tell a cohesive story. An obstacle I had to push through in the duration of the whole project, was choosing the name for the fan club. Along the way I learned many aspects one needs to consider before deciding on the name, and how it’s important to keep an open mind to get to a name that makes the most sense for the project.
ESTABLISHING THE TONE

For this project to stand out, I needed to counter the aesthetics established by the big brand campaigns yet still feel current to the trends out there.

When I looked at the sport-related advertisements out there, they didn’t seem to have the light and elegant energy that reflects the craft of volleyball and the elements to it.
EXPLORATION—MOODBOARD I

// expressive type
// expressionist-inspired
// stylized figure

// individual pieces for website, that come together in compositions for posters and digital ads
// more organic lines and shapes

EXPLORATION—MOODBOARD II

// abstract illustration
// shape-driven
// patterns and blocks of color

// limited palette — 4 to 5 colors
// dimensional type to create more depth
// peeking compositions

Idea exploration.
EXPLORATION—MOODBOARD III

// acidic colors contrasted with b/w linear geometric compositions
// slab serif type, referencing common sports jersey type
// layered block imagery and type

EXPLORATION—MOODBOARD III—SELECTED

// collage feel
// restoring historical moments
// playing off the "rewind the story" idea
// piecing together elements to make eye-catching compositions
// minimalist feel, yet expressive type commenting on elements paired with a clean modern sans
PROCESS—DEFINING THE STYLE

Throughout the design process I explored various color palettes, typeface combinations and compositions.

Once I chose a specific layout to push forward, I focused on making variations with different typeface choices, and scale.
COLOR EXPLORATION

The colors were chosen to push forward the idea of playfulness that is often pushed away from when showcasing sports. While the information presented might be heavy, the colors contrast it and make it feel lighter.

Gradient mapping photo treatment is used to unite the historic images from past Olympic games and other competitions, and present them in a more modern light. The geometric shapes that make the compositions of the net and the ball throughout the project unify the structure of the visuals as a whole.

The typeface chosen for the headers is Program Nar OT which has curves to create friendliness, while being condensed and italicizes to emphasize movement. The typeface paired with it is Roboto Condensed, which complements the primary typeface.

FINAL AESTHETIC

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MARK PROCESS

NAME CHANGE

One of the biggest challenges throughout the duration of this project was choosing a name to represent the club and the fans. Initially when I was researching the history of volleyball and its terminology I came across a word—mintonette—which is what volleyball used to be called before it was renamed “volleyball.” I found the word fascinating and connecting to the tone and the overall voice for the project really well.

While not being completely settled on a name, I continued pushing the project forward, as seen in the sketches on the left, and came up with a lockup I found fitting. The team name mitonettes sounded classy and fitting for the sport, but the feminine ending “ette” made the name potentially exclusive and not relating to the locals. Only weeks later when I was about to finish up the project I landed on the name “Spikes,” “Portland’s Spikes.” This name relates on the level of being short and to the point, similar to the elements in game.

FINAL MARK
Those interested in the game and the U.S. team would first learn about the fan club through the native ads on the USA Volleyball website. USA Volleyball would also spread the word on their Instagram with digital ads.
Variations of Instagram ads.

Web banner ads for the USA Volleyball website.
DESKTOP WEBSITE

The website is the core of the project. It serves as the home base for the fan club. The layout throughout is made using the collage compositions with type elements to drive the user through the experience. Certain section of the website are animated to be more engaging and memorable.


Section I—Introduction to Spikes

Once the person loads the page, they are addressed by the Spikes, who are the current fans. This page’s goal is to establish a tone and an understanding to why the fan club exists and what we hope to achieve.
The sections that follow establish the tone and explain the perspectives the Spikes are coming from.

Section II—The USA Volleyball Story

The section starts off by telling the story of volleyball and challenging the established perceptions.
Revive the Sport, Rewind the Story

Maryana Kuznetsova

Section

The section finishes off with a timeline of significant events that led to the formation of the league. This is an interactive timeline that users can click through to travel through decades.
This section is for those who don’t know the rules to the game or haven’t found a clear exploration before. It starts off with a sub-navigation that scrolls to the different sections of the page.
Here the viewer can learn about the game by following a step-by-step interactive explanation of the elements. Each step is revealed as the person scrolls through the page.

Here the viewer can learn some of the jargon volleyball players use by clicking through the links and discovering the image compositions.
Section III—Get Involved in the Community

The section starts off by showing a way to get ready for the league by watching videos of past games.

The merchandise section offers a curated collection of products for purchase.
The app is initially meant to act as a learning tool for those unaware what to watch for in a game. It would have a section with narrated video footage, along with a comments section where the users can discuss a specific play with their fellow Spikes. Once the league launches the app would update to have elements such as a newsfeed and an option to favorite a specific team to follow.
This thesis project pushed me to explore the subject that is close to me, making some of the decisions harder than others. If I wasn’t as passionate about the sport and the people who play it, I wouldn’t have gone through the research path looking at participation and how to get more people involved. And if I didn’t truly care about the name of the fan club, I wouldn’t have spent weeks trying to decide on one. My personal connection to the subject made me explore the paths of my research I wouldn’t have otherwise, and the overall execution would have been very different have I not spent hours animating various paths of the website to showcase the movement in the game.

If I was to continue working on this project, I would keep pushing the interactive elements of the website, along with some content; and if I was to develop out the app I would add different versions of the app for the individual teams that will be playing in the league. From all the challenges that came along my way I grew as a designer and as a researcher, and from this experience I learned that this is only the beginning and the project can be expanded further endlessly.


"What Are the Rose City Riveters?" Rose City Riveters, rosecityriveters.org/what-are-the-rose-city-riveters/.