

Soccer Specific Stadia & Designated Players: Exploring the Major League Soccer Attendance Assumption?

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One of the most significant elements in profit outcomes for a sport organization is ticket sales (Irwin, Sutton, & McCarthy, 2008). Prior research has established relationships between a variety of factors and spectator attendance patterns in the United States yet much of this body of work considers the “big three” sports of football, basketball, and baseball. While the global literature on soccer spectator attendance is abundant (Allen & Roy, 2008; Brandes, Franck, & Nuesch, 2008; Garcia & Rodríguez, 2002; Madalozzo & Villar, 2009), these studies and respective findings are contextual and therefore not applicable to professional soccer in North America.

The following study is specific in scope. It seeks to explore the relationship between Major League Soccer (MLS) attendance figures and two conspicuous trends permeating the league, 1) the construction and finance of soccer specific stadia and 2) paying market value for “designated players” (DPs).

Since the opening of Crew Stadium in Columbus, Ohio in 1999, MLS continues to encourage the construction and finance of soccer specific stadia throughout the league. The late Lamar Hunt was the pioneer behind this movement, which presumes (among other benefits) soccer specific stadia will attract larger crowds by providing a more appealing atmosphere for spectators. Although this notion seems plausible and has been recognized by prominent academes (Southall & Nagel, 2007), empirical evidence to support it is elusive.

In 2007 MLS amended its contentious salary cap restrictions to permit franchises to sign one highly marketable player without having the total amount of this particular “designated player’s” salary count against the team’s overall cap. The amendment was a strategic effort to make it possible for the Los Angeles Galaxy to acquire international superstar David Beckham (Wahl, 2009). Although it took nearly two years to achieve approval from the MLS Board of Governors the league ultimately acknowledged the potential positive impact he, and other future international stars, could have on league attendance figures (Dure, 2010; Wahl, 2009). In 2010 the so called “Beckham Rule” was amended. Currently each team has the flexibility to sign two DPs above the salary cap with the option to sign a third for a fee of \$250,000. While earlier findings from Jewel and Molina (2005) indicate MLS attendance is dependent upon the presence of “better players”, analysis considering the presence of DPs on attendance figures across MLS is needed.

A two-factor ANOVA using SPSS statistical analysis software was used to test whether MLS match attendance figures depends on 1) the type of stadium (Soccer Specific or Multi-purpose) and 2) the rated number of DPs on the rosters of competing teams (0= None, 1= At least 1, & 2 or more= Multiple). Consistent with the league’s rationale outlined above, it is hypothesized both factors will have a statistically significant main

effect. Also, it is hypothesized there will not be a statistically significant main effect for the interaction between the two predictors.

The following preliminary results consider data from the first fourteen weeks of the 2011 season ($N= 139$). Full results will be presented later. After identifying and eliminating outliers, the Levene's Test of Equal Variance indicates the homogeneity of variance assumption is met, $F(5,123) = .948, p > .05$. Results from the Two Factor ANOVA indicate there is neither a statistically significant main effect for type of stadium, $F(1, 123) = .079, p > .05$ nor for the interaction between type of stadium and number of DPs, $F(2, 123) = .021, p > .05$. However, there is a statistically significant main effect for the rated number of DPs on the rosters of the competing teams, $F(2,123) = 8.301, p < .001, \eta^2 = .119$ on attendance figures.

A Tukey post hoc method of multiple comparisons shows there is a statistically significant attendance difference for matches with no DPs and those with multiple DPs ($p < .05$) as well as matches with 1 DP and those with multiple DPs ($p < .001$). Specifically, league matches with multiple DPs outperformed league matches featuring no DP and 1 DP by at least 1,544 and 2,462 spectators respectively.

The preliminary results support the league's motives for introducing and later amending the designated player rule. Surprisingly, considering available data there is no statistical evidence to suggest soccer specific stadia correlates with higher attendance figures across the league. Additional observations and analysis are needed to fully understand this phenomenon.

Finally, the limitations of this study should be made explicit. Previous research has established many other significant factors in explaining the variance of attendance figures for professional sports in the United States (Shank, 2009). These predictors represent opportunities for future inquiry.

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