When Sports Collide: The Hybrid Game of International Rules

Geoff Dickson, AUT University, New Zealand, geoff.dickson@aut.ac.nz

Larry McCarthy, Seton Hall University, USA

Abstract

This research adopted a case study approach to investigate conflict between organizations in an international strategic alliance. A strategic alliance refers to a situation when two or more firms from different countries 1) pursue a set of agreed-upon goals but remain legally independent, 2) share both the benefits of the alliance and control over the performance of assigned tasks during the alliance life, and 3) the partners contribute on a continuing basis to one or more key strategic areas (Wahyuni, Ghauri & Karesten, 2007). Literature on strategic alliances shows that alliances develop over time and pass through three main phases: formation, operation, and evaluation (Nooteboom, 1999).

Globalization and the increasing competitive and technological challenges of today's environment are encouraging the formation of international strategic alliances. Experience with international strategic alliances has shown that they face a number of problems, which can often result in the termination of the alliance. (Kauser, 2007). Previous research (Kauser & Shaw, 2004) has shown that behavioural characteristics such as high levels of commitment, trust, coordination, interdependence and communication are good predictors of international strategic alliance success.

Given this, the purpose of the research was to explore the emergent conflicts when two different sport organizations from different nations, seek to negotiate 'common ground' in pursuit of an international dimension to their traditionally domestic markets.

Sport is a cultural form that is reproduced in the context of evolving social, political, historical, economic and technological dimensions (Darby, 2007).

As such sport will embody different sets of meanings for different groups (Jackson, Brandl-Bredenbeck & John, 2007, Seippel, 2007) and is therefore a suitable context for the study of international strategic alliances.

This study adopted a case study approach of International Rules football that is best referred to as a hybrid version of Australian Rules Football and Gaelic Football. This is a novel context because much of what we already know about partnerships and interorganisational linkages in professional sport is only based upon club or franchise relationships (Dickson, Arnold, & Chalip, 2004).

This study extends our understanding because it examines an alliance between two national governing bodies – the Australian Football League (AFL) and the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). At the elite level International Rules is contested between Australia and Ireland with players selected from the AFL and the GAA.

Data was collected from interviews with some of the principals involved, a review of both Australian and Irish media, and other secondary sources. The analysis indicated that tensions have been evident between the AFL and the GAA since the series was first contested in 1985. In 2006, the GAA withdrew its support for the series citing dissatisfaction with the conduct of the Australian players and their clubs.

Three key sources of conflict were:

1) the development of rules to ensure a evenly matched and safe contest,

2) the level of aggression and physical intimidation appropriate for the game,

3) the recruitment of young Irish players by AFL clubs.

A common theme underpinning these conflicts is that the Australian players are full-time professionals, whereas Gaelic footballers are amateur. These results suggest that both the relational and operational aspects of alliance organisations should be ideally compatible and at the very least flexible.

In conclusion, we argue that the future of the International Rules concept is premised upon the AFL, the AFL clubs and the players relinquishing some of the values and behaviours associated with elite, professional sport.

References

Darby, P. (2007). Gaelic games, ethnic identity and Irish nationalism in New York City c.1880-1917. Sport in Society, 10(3), 347-367.

Dickson, G., Arnold, T., & Chalip, L. (2005). League expansion and interorganisational power. Sport Management Review, 8(2), 145-165.

Jackson, S. J., Brandl-Bredenbeck, H. P., & John, A. (2005). Lost in translation: Cultural differences in the interpretation of violence in sport advertising. International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing, 1(1-2), 155-168.

Kauser, S. (2007). Alliance relationship dynamics: Conflict, structure and control. Journal of Euromarketing, 16(3), 5-25.

Kauser, S., & Shaw, V. (2004). The influence of behavioural and organisational characteristics on the success of international strategic alliances. International Marketing Review, 21(1), 17-52

Nooteboom, B. (1999). Innovation, Learning and Industrial Organization. Cambridge Journal of Economics, 23, 127-150

Seippel, Ø. (2006). The meanings of sport: Fun, health, beauty or community? Sport in Society, 9(1), 51-70.

Wahyuni, S., Ghauri, P., & Karsten, L. (2007). Managing international strategic alliance relationships. Thunderbird International Business Review, 49(6), 671-687.