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Kramer's Corner

Women Like It When Guys Watch

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By Hilary Kramer

FOX NEWS

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ADVERTISEMENT You would think a blonde taking off her shirt after a key shot that wins a sports championship would be enough to attract all sorts of male viewers. But after three years and over \$100 million dollars invested, the Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA) decided to suspend operations.

Despite a unique player-owner partnership and big names like Mia Hamm, Brandi Chastain -- our shirtless, sports-bra heroine of U.S. Women's Soccer team fame -- and charter sponsors Johnson & Johnson and Hyundai, the professional women's soccer league just couldn't attract enough sponsorship revenue and fan interest to overcome costs. Ratings plunged from 0.4 in year one when WUSA aired on TNT, to a lowly 0.1 when it switched in year two to Pax TV.

And soccer isn't the only women's professional sport that's hurting financially. Gordon Gund, owner of the NBA's Cleveland Cavaliers, recently cut ties with the WNBA's Cleveland Rockers, citing seven consecutive seasons without a profit. Sadly, the move puts the future of this beloved franchise in doubt and adds to the perennial questions about the league's ultimate viability. If not for NBA backing, it's likely that the WNBA would have suffered the same fate as its predecessor women's basketball league, the ABL, which fouled out in just three seasons with \$30 million in losses.

One of the main problems with women's sports is its fan demographic. Sports marketers covet the male, 18-49 age group that men's sports typically draw. But most women's sports have been marketed to attract primarily female fans.

According to Dean Bonham of sports marketing firm, The Bonham Group, "The soccer league didn't have the right business model and staying power. WUSA should have marketed to men and women almost equally."

There have been some notable business triumphs in the world of women's sports, however. Women's tennis has developed a very successful model that seems to resonate with exactly the right demographic. Last year's U.S. Open women's finals drew a 7.2 household rating. Even though it represented a six percent drop in ratings over 2001, the finals were still the highest rated women's sporting event of year and the 15th most watched sporting event of 2002.

Much of this can be attributed to the play of its premier stars, Serena and Venus Williams, who were rated the top and fourth-ranked most-marketable female athletes by a recent Sports Business Daily survey. The Williams sisters were simply carrying the torch for a model developed during the nascent period of women's tennis.

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There were many reasons why women's tennis succeeded those tough early days. Namely, a series of very strategic moves to elevate the importance of the women's side of the sport. Arlen Kantarian, Chief Executive, Professional Tennis, at the U.S. Tennis Association explains,

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"Thirty years ago, one of the biggest moves was USTA's decision to provide equal prize money for women and men at the U.S. Open. Equal prize money certainly helps translate into equal interest and coverage."

Thirty years later, the USTA along with CBS moved the women's final to primetime.

This proved to be a smart move as the Williams versus Williams Women's Final was a huge ratings and financial success for both the USTA and CBS. Give women and men equality of pay

and ultimately, they will receive equality in the number and type of fans following the sport. And this surely translates into a beneficial cycle for everyone involved. In the case of the USTA, prize money for both men and women at the 2003 U.S. Open was raised to an unprecedented \$1.0 million.

Stars like Billie Jean King and Chris Evert did for women's tennis what Larry Bird and Magic Johnson did for the NBA -- propelled the sport into the mainstream by attracting not just women to tennis, but drawing everyone to women's tennis.

It wasn't always such a grand slam for women's tennis, though.

Notes Bonham, "Starting a sports league can take decades. Twenty-five years ago, women's tennis was struggling too. To survive, you must have a very long-term commitment, the financial backing and a workable business model in place."

It takes time for stars to develop and for the mainstream public to embrace them. Only then can sports leagues create a loyal and growing fan base able to sustain their businesses. And if you're a really lucky league willing to take some chances and invest real money, a Serena Williams might come your way and carry your league to success -- game, set and match.

Hilary Kramer serves as a business news contributor at FOX News Channel. She can be seen on **Cashin' In** every Saturday at 11:30 am and Monday at 5:30 am on the FOX News Channel.

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