Contact:
Ira Silverman
Taylor & Silverman Communications, Inc.
322 Eighth Avenue
New York, NY 10001
212/949-4141

THE NASL GOES YEAR-ROUND WITH INDOOR AND OUTDOOR SOCCER

As the saying goes, it is a wise step to put your best foot forward at all times. In the case of the North American Soccer League, they are proceeding two steps at a time by putting both feet forward in a bold attempt to turn the league around financially.

Seen as a dynamic business move by many soccer insiders, the NASL is widening its path for 1983-84 by expanding its season year-round to include indoor as well as outdoor games.

Howard Samuels, president and chief executive officer of the NASL, has a well-defined program for the combination of both seasons and a codified plan of operation and execution. Although the NASL has several reasons for the new venture, there are three major objectives involved - - increased profits, improved financial management and more detailed organizational strategy.

"First," states Samuels, "adding an indoor season to the existing outdoor schedule is financially attractive. With proper planning, indoor play should contribute $200 to $400 thousand to each team's bottom line the first year. With the year-round season, we expect that attendance, broadcast revenues and sponsorships will increase, as well."

NASL budgetary projections indicate that indoor soccer could contribute as much as $500,000 in 1984-85 and $650,000 in 1985-86.

For the NASL to play indoors is nothing new. To be able to project and make substantial profits is. Since the late '60's and early '70's, the league has played indoor soccer unprofitably; and, lately, only a few of the league's teams have participated.

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For 1983-84, however, the time for a combined indoor and outdoor season is ripe. According to Samuels, several factors make the financial pickings profitable for indoor soccer: the indoor game is now a better product and offers a growing market; the information base on spectators is more solid and accurate; additional cities are being considered for franchises; there are new business plans set for the league; and adding regular games opens more opportunities for television revenues. Above all, some indoor teams are doing very well.

Another reason to opt for the year-long season, notes Samuels, "is that the 12-month configuration is likely to be more financially attractive than either indoor or outdoor by itself."

Year-round awareness, too, attracts more sponsorship money. Sponsors plan their advertising budgets on a 12-month basis, so the advisability of increasing advertising schedules for an entire year is great, because this approach is more consistent with their annual plans. Without indoor, the soccer "season" would remain idle for about half the year in the sponsor's eyes. Samuels remarks that, "the keys to success here will be to educate our clients to 12-month sponsorship programs and annual planning, and for our teams to plan well in advance."

Regarding broadcast rights, ticket sales, group sales, camps and clinics, Samuels sees the need to increase these activities and profit margins, as well. With the year-round playing format, success is most likely.

Another advantage of a single franchise playing two seasons in one year, Samuels points out, is the increased productivity generated by the assets of the club - - namely, the team and the staff.

To maximize profitability and better utilize staffs, Samuels suggests an overall financial planning schedule for both indoor and outdoor, the principle being that to efficiently manage a year-round business, an annual program must be developed.

"The main flexpoint for a two-season franchise," notes the NASL president, "is that costs are only about $450,000 greater than for an outdoor-only club." Samuels also says that in spite of the longer season, payrolls for players and staffs remain reasonably constant even if both seasons are played.

Organizational plans call for NASL teams to play 28 indoor games from November through April. After a four-week break, there will be 28 outdoor games scheduled from May through October, with a four-week break after that. Except for Montreal, Fort Lauderdale, Team America and Toronto, all NASL teams will compete.

Based on the NASL's financial and marketing studies, indoor soccer along with outdoor must be considered as one annual major business opportunity. Strategically, sponsors, spectators, players and staffs will have to reorganize according to the demands of this longer soccer season. The NASL projects that the increased revenue generated by this two-season approach will far outweigh the necessary increase of staff, which will be minimal. Cost-efficiencies, too, will be found in salaries, equipment and other necessary operating outlays, since, in effect, the teams will be enjoying the advantages of two seasons for the price of one.

When the central areas of finances, organization and strategy are considered, all indications point to increased profits and decreased losses, more efficient management, increased productivity and more effective marketing over the entire year for the NASL.

Jumping in with both feet (indoor and outdoor soccer), then, is not only a formidable move for the NASL, but a solid business decision.

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