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# IMPROVING SPONSORING PARTNERSHIPS IN SPORTS

Case: Mikkelin Palloilijat

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<p><b>Abstract</b></p> <p>This thesis deals with sponsoring. The subject is viewed mostly from the point of view of the sponsored party but also from the point of view of the companies engaging in sponsoring activities. The focus is on sponsoring in sports. The objective of this thesis was to learn about sponsoring as a concept and how to improve sponsoring partnerships with division football teams in Finland.</p> <p>Sponsoring is a marketing asset for sponsors and a way of acquiring resources for the sponsored operations. It is a co-operative action that requires work and effort from both parties to be successful and effective. Sponsoring is the biggest source of resources for football teams in Finland especially in division football.</p> <p>As the sponsoring in division football is the lifeline of many teams it is important to build long lasting and effective partnerships that benefit both parties involved. Also, the resources in division football are limited so the companies and teams must make better and more efficient partnerships that reach the companies target audience and add value to both parties' operations.</p> <p>The empirical phase of this thesis involves a study conducted by a football team Mikkelin Palloilijat Ry. The study was carried out by interviews of the sponsors of Mikkelin Palloilijat Ry. The interviews were conducted via telephone before the 2020 football season. The objective of the interviews was to learn about the current partnerships, the companies' views of sponsoring and through that providing improvement suggestions for the team.</p> <p>Based on the information gathered from the interviews with the sponsors and the team representatives it can be stated that the sponsoring operations could be improved vastly from the viewpoint of both sides of the partnerships. Sponsors feel they do not possibly get most of the partnership and it is not conducted in the most effective way. Many partnerships are closer to charity than actual sponsoring. Improvements could be made on both sides of the partnership.</p>			
Keywords Sponsoring, Sports marketing,			

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis deals with sponsoring in sports and focuses on sponsoring in sports. The goal is to study sponsoring as a marketing tool and how to improve partnerships in order to make them more beneficial. This study is conducted for Mikkelin Palloilijat Ry. Mikkelin Palloilijat is a football team that competes in the second highest tier of Finnish football, Ykkönen.

Sports team activities are generally beneficial operations that aim to encourage children and adults to engage in sports and exercise. Regular practice and competition are characteristics of sports. Maintaining these operations come with various expenses and these are partially covered by the state, kiosk sales and voluntary work. Running a football team requires money for many things, players' salaries, equipment, transportation for away games, organizing home games and most teams in Finland do not own training venues and they pay rent for the city that owns them. Football teams have many ways of acquiring funds and resources to make these things happen and most of it comes from sponsors.

Sponsoring is a rather new way of executing a company's marketing communication. Because it is such a new concept many companies and sponsored organizations do not have the knowledge and know-how to operate partnerships in the most effective way. Challenges revolve around the companies lack of effort towards sponsoring and the sponsored organizations lack of resources in terms of man power and experience in these matters. Still, it is the most important way of acquiring resources and funds to operate so it is worth to study and improve. Sponsorship deals can be seen in sports events through advertisement seen in the events that a team organizes, such as adverts placed besides the field in games and company logos printed in the kits the team plays in. Social media channels are also a big source to gain audience.

Sponsoring is studied via business literature and internet publications. Sponsoring was studied and researched in practice by interviewing the sponsors of the Mikkelin Palloilijat football team. After understanding and learning about sponsoring and the effectivity of its development suggestions and ideas are shared in the conclusion. The interviews were conducted through phone between February and April. After understanding the concept and the pros and cons of sponsoring the aim was to improve the sponsoring structure and the decision-making process of sponsoring to improve the partnerships of Mikkelin Palloilijat football team.

## 2 SPONSORING

Sponsoring can be defined as a cooperation agreement between the sponsor and a separate organization that is based on tangible and intangible services that go both ways. It is a strategic and commercial investment for both parties involved that is planned and implemented together and separately. Sponsoring works in a way that the company pays with money or other tangible assets for the right to be associated with the sponsored target and gains visibility and positive image through mental association with the sponsored targets operations. It is a transactional activity that creates value for both. It creates measurable value for both organizations' operations. It differs from charity actions because in sponsoring both gain something and in charity only the supported organization gains financial or other resources. (Valanko 2009, 46.)

Sponsorship involves two main activities a business transaction between a sponsor and sponsored where the latter receives a fee, and the former obtains the right to be associated with the activity sponsored and the marketing of the association by the sponsor. (Cornwell & Maignan 1998, 11.)

Sponsoring is a part of marketing communication that aims to influence potential customers needs and behavior indirectly. Sponsoring is a business partnership where a company offers financial or other tangible assets for the sponsored organization in exchange for the right to be associated with the sponsored organization and gain their good brand and raise awareness of the sponsor and through that improve their business operations. (Juholin, 2009, 224-225.)

Sponsoring is an exchange between a company and the sponsored where company gives their own resources (usually money, but also other tangible assets) to an event and receives marketing or other benefits through association with the event. (O'Hagan & Harvey 2000, 205)



FIGURE 1. Basic model of sponsoring (Alaja & Forssell 2004, 21.)

Sponsoring has many different definitions but most of them recognize the benefits the sponsoring company receives are the association and the positive mental images the sponsored operation projects to the sponsoring company. There are many different sponsoring types hence the many different definitions of the concept.

As sponsoring has many different operating modes and are usually a combination of many different modes to gain a working package that is molded for the specific partnership in question. The most common is that a sponsoring target has one or two principal partners and many "side partners". The principal partners are the most important for the sponsored party and should be regarded as such with them getting more visibility and attention than the others. Principal partners also give the most assets for the sponsored, usually money. Principal partners should be separated clearly with the other partners, so the principal partners get the visibility and attention that they pay for. (Valanko, 2009, 49-50.)

## 2.1 History of sponsoring

Sponsoring has been around since the gladiators in the ancient Rome. Gladiators were sponsored by the emperors in hopes to gain popularity among common folk. So, the roots of sponsoring are deep in the history of marketing. Coca-Cola was an Olympic sponsor already in the 1928 Olympics. (Alaja, Forssell 2004, 11.)

Modern sponsoring started in the USA in the 1960s and has since spread to everywhere in the world. It started when commercial programs were developed and endorsed by companies. The Americans are the pioneers behind the development of sponsoring into what it is nowadays. Sponsoring increased rapidly in between the 1970s and 1980s. Reasons for this rapid growth were because sponsoring was seen as this new innovative way of marketing and everyone wanted to be part of it. Companies were afraid that if they do not hop on the trend they get squashed by the competition. (Valanko 2009, 31-33.)

Sponsoring has been done in Finland since the 1960s in individual and team sports. In 2019 according to sponsoring indicator over 60% of funds used in sports operations were gathered from sponsors. In total 162 million euros were used to sponsor sport activities which is 4,5% more than in 2018. Although, sponsoring has increased recently in Finland other Scandinavian countries such as in Sweden and Norway sponsoring is used more effectively and more diversely. (Sponsor Insight 14-2-2020.)

During this growth period the partnership deals had a strong resemblance to charity as many companies did not receive any additional value from their support for events and organizations. Sponsoring now is a very useful and effective way to market a company. Challenges for sponsoring now are standing out because the constant information flow caused by the technological advances and social media. (Alaja, Forssell, 2004, 12.)

## 2.2 Sponsoring targets

Sponsoring targets are usually divided into three categories: sports, culture, and others. In Finland, the sponsoring has seen growth in recent years. In 2018, companies in Finland used 248 million euros on sponsoring, with 155 million euros (62,5%) going to sports. In 2019, the results were similar, with a total of 260 million euros (+4,8%) used in sponsoring and with 162 million euros (62%) of it going to sports. When comparing the years 2018 and 2019, the trend can be seen that sponsoring in sports has seen steady growth both years: 4,0% (2018) and 4,5% (2019). (FIGURE 2) Sport is easily the most popular sponsoring target in Finland, and its popularity is based on long traditions and know-how. The most interesting and the most popular team sports in Finland are Ice Hockey and Football. (Sponsor Insight 17-3-2020.) Sponsoring on other fields than sports saw a decrease in 2018 but in 2019 both cultural and other sponsored targets saw a raise. Sports organizations are also known as the most active on seeking sponsors and more likely to take the initiative when starting a partnership discussion. (Alaja, Forssell 2004, 96.)

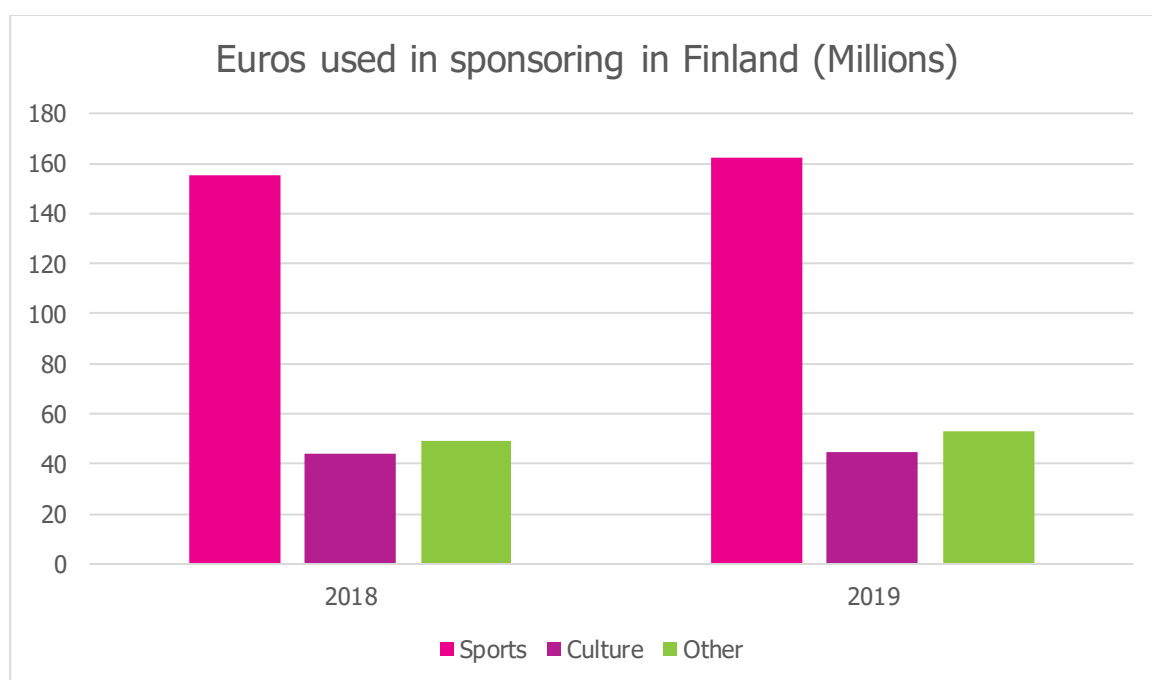


FIGURE 2. Money used in sponsoring in Finland (Data from sponsoring Indicator Finland 2020)

### 2.3 Goals of sponsoring

Sponsoring as a bare concept is a marketing decision of a company to increase their recognizability and get better brand image by paying a certain operation for the right to be associated with them. This means that they get the good publicity that the sponsored organization has, and this improves the sponsoring company's brand image and reaches potential customers. As said, sponsoring must give both parties involved something; as if that is not the case, it is not seen as sponsoring rather than charity. (Valanko, 2009, 40-47.)

### 2.4 Problems and obstacles in partnerships

Sponsoring partnerships face many obstacles to overcome in creating mutually beneficial partnerships. From the sponsoring company's point of view, the problems tend to revolve around not having

enough knowledge in sponsoring and think they know more than they really do. This is because the companies do not clearly know the strengths of their sponsored operations and do not know how to use them efficiently. (Valanko, 2009, 94.) Also, many companies do not realize that when they acquire a partnership, they are only getting the right to be called a sponsor and not a ready promotional campaign. The sponsoring is only a part of a broader marketing plan which the partnership must be suitable for. (Shank, 2002, 404-405.) Partnerships are a two-way street where both get something, and companies often mistake sponsoring with financial support or charity. Many sponsoring activities are not planned thoroughly and neglected when planning a company's promotional strategy. If the decision to start sponsoring something is seen as a charitable action the partnership tends to be very one-sided as the company does not seek to gain much from the sponsor. This makes the sponsored party less likely to try to improve the partnership as they have got what they wanted and needed which was the money or other resources to run their operations. This creates dysfunctional partnerships and steer the whole deal further away from it being a sponsoring activity. It is hard to improve a relationship that the other party does not understand or have that much interest in.

## 2.5 Sponsoring in sports

Most of the sport organizations in Finland cannot operate without external funding, especially in the lower divisions. Most of the money needed to run the organizations comes from sponsors. Gaining and keeping sponsors faces many challenges and obstacles with many teams having limited resources to improve their partnerships. (Roivas, 2020.) Football is a team sport and there are over 140 000 registered players in Finland and approximately 500 000 Finns are associated with football weekly. (Sponsor Insight 17-3-2020.)

Sports sponsorship targets have a few common characteristics. Usually, sports gain a lot of publicity and through that it can offer wide range of visibility for the sponsors. Sports are very popular and easily associated with healthy lifestyle and wellbeing so the common attitudes towards sports are usually positive. (Alaja, Forssell 2004, 96.) Sponsoring in sports has many different targets to sponsor. A company can sponsor a certain athlete, a team, or an event. Companies use the association through the sponsored entity in different ways. For example, the sporting apparel and equipment manufacturer adidas sponsors sports in every mentioned way. They sponsor individual athletes such as footballer Lionel Messi who is one of the most well-known athletes in the world. They pay millions of euros for him to wear adidas gear in matches and use his face in their advertisements. (Nelson, 2017.) Adidas also sponsor teams such as Real Madrid who have a net worth of 4.26 billion \$. Adidas provides the team all their used apparel which includes kits and training gear. So adidas is always associated with Real Madrid and adidas logos can be seen all over their training ground and their stadium Santiago Bernabeu. (Khan, 2019.) Adidas also sponsors sports events such as the FIFA World Cup which is the most followed sporting event over half of the global population watched some kind of official broadcast of the last World Cup in 2018. (FIFA, 2018.) Adidas is a big scale example of sports sponsorship programs. Many companies sponsor many different operations in the field of sport. Adidas has a big brand and uses a lot of money on their marketing and a big

part of that is sponsoring. Sponsoring works in the same way in every scenario only the effectiveness and the level of financial input differs from each individual case. The more visibility you receive the more you must pay for the sponsorship deal. Therefore, Adidas must pay millions of dollars for the right to associated with top level athletes and competitions.

The Sports industry exists to satisfy the needs of three different types of consumers: spectators, participants, and sponsors. (Shank, 2002, 11.) Without spectators the sport industry does not work as they are what brings in money for the operations of all three of them. If a sports event does not have any spectators, the participants cannot get paid and no sponsor wants to be associated with a sports organization without any audience. When sponsoring sports, you must be aware of the nature of the sport and what kind of audience you will reach through that specific sport. Sports fans must be analyzed as potential customers and how their buying behavior is affected by the team's sponsors. When sponsor and a team work together in order to improve the experience for attending a team organized event such as a game can the sponsor and the team obtain revenues and new customers depending on the success of the event. A successful team is an attractive product, and the marketing possibilities can be affected by the team's success. For example, if a team is playing badly are the fans more likely to stay at home and not attend the matches therefore the team loses revenue from tickets and merchandise not sold and the sponsor loses audience for their advertisement in the event. On the other hand, if a team is thriving and the games packed full the team gains more revenue and the sponsor gets a positive image when they are associated with a successful organization and the mental association works in the mind of the fan. Although the advertisement in the events such as games are not the only way of being associated with a team it plays a big part when creating mental images for the potential customer.

### 3 CREATING WORKING PARTNERSHIPS

#### 3.1 Sponsor selection

Sponsoring should not be confused with charity as charity is not a business partnership as it does not aim for publicity and association even though it can have positive impacts for the company that engages in charitable actions. Charity does not aim for publicity as it is meant to help the charity target without expecting anything back. This is the main difference between sponsoring and charity. Sponsoring requires the counter transaction for the financial or other assets received from the sponsor. (Valanko, 2009, 54.)

After understanding the concept of sponsoring companies must make tailored solutions that fit their business field and customer base as sponsoring is a strategic decision that must add value for both and must be regarded as such. So, when conducting a partnership must companies consider all aspects of the partnership. Is this partnership going to add value to my operations, do I want my business or product to be associated with this kind of operations and do I reach my target audience through this partnership?

The company must have a clear idea of what they want to achieve when sponsoring something. Effective sponsoring must follow a few principles, so it works in a best possible way and reaches the desired target audience. The company and the sponsored organization must share similar values, so the mental images and positive influences gained from the sponsored organizations operations work the best. The company must also consider if the sponsored party has big enough audience and brand that it gets the amount of exposure that it hopes to gain. (Valanko, 2009, 75-81.)

From the sponsored party's point of view the aim is to acquire as many resources as possible in order to be successful. The value of any sponsorship deal is subject to the following aspects:

- How much coverage does the sponsored party receive in the media (newspapers, TV, internet, social media)?
- Who usually attend the events (matches)?
- What, in particular does the sponsor gain by associating with this event?

All these questions must be answered in order to find the right sponsors for this particular partnership in question. (Bladen, Kennel, Abson, Wilde, 2018, 174-175.)

#### 3.2 Planning and executing

Before pitching the idea of sponsoring to a company it is vital to have a clear sponsorship plan. The way sponsoring works is different in every partnership deal as the marketing possibilities, audience and used marketing channels are different in every organization. You cannot get the same kind of exposure in sponsoring an art gallery and a football tournament. The way of accessing the positive mental images offered by the sponsored organization must be tailored to the specific organization

for the partnership to be beneficial and effective in order to get into the minds of possible customers. Also, partnership deals can be executed in a way creates direct sales for the sponsor, for example if a football team were sponsored by a brewery, they could sell their products directly in their games and other events. Such as KuPS does in their Veikkausliiga games. (KuPS, partners, 2020.)

### 3.3 Maintaining partnerships

Key to a long-lasting partnership is to maintain the relationship between the sponsor and the sponsored. The biggest responsibility of this falls to the sponsored organization, as they have received for example money and they need to hold their end of the agreement. Sponsors must be kept contented and all business communication must be of good taste between the sponsor and the organization. Communication plays a crucial role in this part of the partnership as well because the easier and effortless the communication between the parties is the easier it is to share ideas and give feedback either good or bad. (De Pelsmacker, Geuens, Van Den Bergh, 2018, 486.)

Evaluating of the successfulness of the partnership should be done often to see if the partnership is beneficial for parties. If the partnership is lopsided and only other gets any kind of improvements the whole partnership should be re-evaluated and improved to meet the previously assessed benefits that made the partnership happen in the first place. Regularly evaluating the partnership saves money for the sponsoring company as they can improve the partnership or cut it off if it is not giving the company the benefits of associating with the sponsored organization as it is supposed to. (Bladen et al. 2018, 179.)

## 4 CASE: MIKKELIN PALLOILIJAT

Following chapter will introduce Mikkelin Palloilijat(=MP) a football team that competes in Ykkönen the second highest division in Finnish football. Their organization, operations, and marketing methods.

Mikkelin Palloilijat is a football team from Mikkeli Finland. The team was founded in 1929. At the start the team participated in bandy and ice hockey. Football was included in 1930. Nowadays football is the only sport that Mikkelin Palloilijat participates in. Ice hockey became an individual entity that carries the name of Jukurit in 1970. Bandy separated itself from MP in 1977 and is known as Kampparit now. They both play in the top divisions of their respective sport. Mikkeli currently has two football teams: MP and Mikkelin Pallo-Kissat that play in the division below Kakkonen. (Mikkelin Palloilijat Ry. 2020.)

MP has youth teams from U7: s to U20: s. They participate in tournaments and local leagues. MP also has their traditional football camp in the summer that has been held for decades that is very popular. It offers young boys and girls the opportunity to get in to football and sports. (Mikkelin Palloilijat Ry. 2020.)

MP also takes part in other operations such as organizes events. Last year they had a small festival to celebrate the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the organization. The festival was in the Mikkeli marketplace in the center of the city. It hosted few Finnish artists and bands such as Eppu Normaali and the male artist of the year 2019 Lauri Tähkä. The event was popular and received good feedback from visitors. (Roivas, 2020.)

MP: s athletic performance has stayed rather the same in the last decade. The team has been in the Ykkönen and Kakkonen the whole decade. As the development has not been fast and managers have changed many times in the recent year's MP has shown promise in the last 3 years performance wise. Last season the team went undefeated until the last game of the season where they had already clinched promotion. In the offseason MP did some personnel change as their head coach for two years Janne Wilkman left to work in England for the Aston Villa organization and was replaced by Juha Pasoja. MP has also added quality in their squad and kept hold of their past performers from last season. The team looks ready for the promotion and there is an excitement for the coming season. The upcoming season is a challenge in the higher division but, MP seems to be up for it as the results in the Finnish Cup has shown where they have gotten good results against good teams. Of course, the challenge is big as promotions are always difficult for the promoted teams, but MP is in a good place right now and staying up and solidifying their place in Ykkönen is entirely possible and somewhat likely. (Roivas, 2020.)

The men's first team only has one full-time employee who handles a lot of different jobs and must take care of many things in the day-to-day operations. Lack of staff is due to having to little resources to employ more full-time staff. This is partly compensated with the members of the board

being very active in running the football club and they are very passionate about the team and the team's success. (Roivas, 2020.)

### Strengths

Mikkelin Palloilijat strengths base on a strong foundation and popularity in the area of Southern-Savo. They have traditions and are popular in their operating area. Mikkeli is a football city and audience for MP games is very big for a city of 50 000 inhabitants. Team is competitive which increases interest towards them. Season is played in the summer when there is not much competition for live sports event in the area so, people are likely to come to games because there is no alternative of competitive sports of same level as Mikkelin Pallokissat plays in the division below. Most of MP's biggest sponsors have been working with the team for many years and can be trusted on. Also, the team board members are very passionate about the team and invest in it very much both money and other resources. The board members have a lot of connections locally that help MP gain sponsors and opportunities to get funds. (Roivas, 2020.)

### Weaknesses

Weaknesses revolve around not having enough full-time staff to do all aspects of the organization effectively, reason for this is not having enough money to employ more full-time employees and the current staff gets their hands full on keeping the current operations working and possibilities to develop the operations are limited. Also, the current staff lacks the know-how on certain aspects of running a football club, such as marketing and social media management. These all could be outsourced but due to lack of resources they are done inside the house. Biggest weakness in the sponsoring of MP is the lack of dialogue between sponsoring companies and the team staff to get the most out of the partnership. This is because of the companies lack interest in developing the process and the team not having enough people to work on maintaining and developing sponsoring projects. The absence of communication between the parties is the biggest obstacle in having effective and working partnerships. A problem with getting new partnerships is that Mikkeli has a big ice hockey team Jukurit and it also seeks for sponsors in the same area as MP. This creates a competition for the sponsors and Jukurit having a bigger audience as ice hockey is bigger in Finland has the advantage in this competition. Also, the financial support from the city of Mikkeli is bigger for Jukurit than it is for MP. (City of Mikkeli, 2019.) Even though seasons are played in different times the small and medium sized companies might not have enough funds to sponsor both teams and might prefer the one over the other.

### Opportunities

Due to it being a summer when an international football tournament is being held interest towards football is on the rise and it is more likely that casual fans attend matches. Also, football in Finland in general is enjoying more interest than in years due to the men's national team qualifying for the EURO 2020 tournament held in Europe and more Finnish footballers doing good in big leagues. Also, additional marketing opportunities will surface as local businesses want to hop on the hype around football in the summer and want to be associated with football due to it having much interest during an international tournament. (Outi Salonen, Taloustutkimus 2020.)

And as always, a team is just as interesting as the performance on the field is if the team plays entertaining football and gets results the whole organization is more appealing and will gain attention that provides possibilities for teams marketing and sponsors gain publicity. Opportunities lie also in the summer vacationers who come to Mikkeli as it is a city near the Lake Saimaa which is a large tourist attraction, and many people have summer houses and cottages there. Successful past season increases interest and attracts better players which increases fans and spectators' interest. Due to the promotion to higher division games are broadcasted in Elisa Viihde streaming service so viewers have more possibilities to see the games and sponsors get more publicity as the games can be viewed anywhere. This a big strength from a marketing point of view as the viewership increases drastically and it opens new marketing possibilities for the team and sponsors.

### Threats

Having a bad season for the team is a major threat that decreases interest and revenue as people might not want to come and see a losing team. As the audience decreases so does the sponsoring company's interest towards sponsoring the team. Also, some small threats towards Finnish footballs visibility in total comes from the fact that the EURO 2020 is played at the same time and it might steal viewers that prefer the highest level of football instead of local football when given the choice. COVID-19 also affects every field of business and sports are not safe from the effects of the virus outbreak. The football season is postponed until further notice and this is a big problem even though it was the right thing to do in this situation. Many companies are losing profits and are in financial trouble and might see sponsoring as an extra cost that should be cut in order to stay in business. (Roivas, 2020.)

### SWOT Chart

<b>Strengths</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- History</li> <li>- Popularity in area</li> <li>- Best football team in the area</li> <li>- Locally connected board members</li> </ul>	<b>Weaknesses</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of resources</li> <li>- Understaffed</li> <li>- Competition for sponsors with other sports</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New marketing channels because of promotion</li> <li>- Football hype in Finland (EURO 2020, Pukki)</li> </ul>	<b>Threats</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Popularity depending on results</li> <li>- Must compete with EURO 2020 for viewers if games at the same time</li> <li>- COVID-19 (Restricted spectators)</li> </ul>

FIGURE 3. SWOT Analysis of MP:s marketing situation (Järvinen)

## Marketing in division football in Finland

When it comes to a football teams marketing possibility the visibility factor must be addressed through critical evaluation. As the division MP plays is not the highest in Finland it creates certain problems as the visibility is smaller than in the top division Veikkausliiga and it makes challenges for the teams competing in the lower tiers to attract big sponsors as they might be skeptical about what kind of exposure their association would get. Football in general is not the most spectators attracting team sport and football teams must also compete with other sports for sponsors. Ice hockey is the most popular sports in Finland as Finland has a tradition of being a big ice hockey country with many of the sports best players coming from Finland. On the other hand, the seasons in football and ice hockey are played in different times so local sports people can attend both and teams don't lose visitors in their games because the games were at the same time. An-other problem that football and other sports teams face in Finland is the small population and scarcity of people. It is impossible to have over 5000 spectators on average in games if the population of the city is under 150 000 as there is not enough people. Also, in the summer many people have their vacations, so they are not present, and many events are being held in the summer, so they take a part of the viewers on certain games. (Ainoa Mittari, 2019.)

Teams marketing usually focuses on local visibility as the competition is not global and it does not seek global visibility as, it is not cost-effective. Marketing in division football is mostly local adverts in local papers and other local advertising channels. Not many teams have national advertisements and usually they focus on local visibility. Also, sponsors are gathered from companies operating in the team's area. (Roivas, 2020.)

Most teams use social media as one of their marketing channels. If used properly this can be an effective tool and can boost visibility and promotional value. After viewing the social media handles only, the biggest teams use them in an effective manner. This is due to them having more resources to use them better. Many teams have social media handles that are poorly managed and lack a clear plan.

With Mikkelin Palloilijat the case of audience is in a good state compared to competitors in similar situations. In 2018 Mikkelin Palloilijat competed in Kakkonen the third highest division in Finnish football. When analyzing statistics MP was the team with the most audience throughout the season with an average audience of 1212. MP had easily the most audience as second on the list was JäPS with an audience average of 590. MP has an audience that can compete with the teams in the higher division as their average would have been 4th on the list of Ykkönen which they were promoted for the following season. This is not a fluke as MP has had over 1000 people in games for 5 years straight and audience is expected to rise as MP were promoted and the team is more interesting and attracting than last year. MP had the 41st biggest audience average on the list of all team sports across Finland. For a team that plays in the third tier of its sport is impressive and the marketing possibilities and potential are big. (Ainoa Mittari 2019.)

Professional sport teams cannot operate without external funding and be competitive. Especially in Finland the teams cannot survive with their own income which comes from their sales (tickets and

merchandise) and governmental funding that comes from the Ministry of Education and Culture. Which MP did not receive this year due to the city declaring that it will only grant funds for teams competing in the highest division. So, the teams must rely on external funding that is mainly from sponsors. MP's funds for the season come mostly from sponsors about 66% of the money comes from sponsors and the rest comes from the team's own sales of tickets, season tickets and team merchandise such as scarves, hats and shirts. Also newly opened online store has boosted sales slightly. (Roivas, 2020.)

Current status when it comes to sponsoring is that MP has a lot of attention from sponsors, but the effectivity is damaged by the lack of full-time staff and the sponsors activity towards the sponsoring operations and marketing possibilities that MP provides them with the sponsorship. Many companies see the sponsoring as a charity-based action and do not even look for publicity and other benefits that the partnership with the team would provide them. Companies do not take the full advantage they get for paying to be associated with the best football team in the area.

"Biggest problem with the sponsors is the fact that there is too little dialogue between the company and the team representatives to develop the partnership and to and development ideas are not shared." (Roivas, 2020.)

Biggest problems are lack of communication between sponsors and the team and the lack of full-time staff for the team as the team only has one full-time employee for the men's team. (Roivas, 2020.)

## 5 RESEARCH MATERIAL AND METHODS

This chapter will go through the chosen research method and the reasoning behind choosing this method. In the end the results are presented and discussed. Also, the reliability and validity of this research is evaluated.

### 5.1 Research method

The chosen method for this research was qualitative research method as the purpose of this study was not to gain numerical data but to understand and interpret the ways behind companies sponsoring effectivity and the decision-making process behind their sponsoring activities and eventually provide development ideas.

Interview enables to dive deeper into the answers provided by the interviewees and allows to clarify the information gained. Interviewing also provides descriptive examples that help to clearly understand the researched topic. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 35-36.)

Quantitative research method is not as suitable for this phenomenon in question as statistics and numerical data would not allow for follow up questions for the subjects and this would provide insufficient information needed for this research.

Interviewees were selected from Mikkelin Palloilijat sponsors. The 12 selected sponsors were both long time partners of the team and recently partnered companies. Companies chosen for this research were all small and medium sized companies and few bigger ones that have their own branch in Mikkeli or Southern-Savo area. Company names are not mentioned to make sure the information is authentic and to have the interview subjects as open as possible about their sponsoring activities. The idea of the interviews was to study the companies sponsoring operations and the decision making behind the process of sponsoring a football team and their involvement in sponsoring in general. Also, it was important to see how different companies evaluate and monitor their sponsoring operations. Goal was to see what the companies think of sponsoring in general and what they feel could be improved in their current sponsoring operations.

Interviews were conducted via telephone between March and April 2020. Interviews took on average 10-20 minutes. All interviews were recorded, and additional notes were also written. Interviews were planned to be made face to face but the COVID-19 outbreak forced them to be done through telephone.

The first part of the questions focuses on what kind of requirements the companies have for their sponsoring deals. What are their goals and objectives when engaging in sponsoring partnerships? This part gives insight on what companies want from the sponsored party and how they view the sponsoring in general. If the company has little requirements for sponsored operation you can assume that the company does not put time into sponsoring and possibly see it as a charitable action. The second part aims to acquire information about how the company manages their current sponsorship deals. These questions focus more on how the current partnerships are put into action and if

the company sees the current partnerships as effective or not. Questions look to see if the companies are up to speed and active in the decision-making process with the sponsored party.

The final part of the questions emphasizes on the interview subjects' future regarding sponsoring, to find out if the companies are looking to increase their involvement in sponsoring or do, they look to decrease their involvement.

## 5.2 Interview Results and Findings.

The sponsors motives to engage in sponsoring activities were rather similar in all cases. Most important thing according to 80% of the interview subjects was to increase the company awareness in the local area. So, the sponsoring targets must be local organizations. With many stating that even though the competition might be nationwide but as most of the business comes from the local area and that is the most important area to focus on when gaining attention and company awareness from consumers. Also, one requirement that almost two thirds of the interviewed companies see as a must when conducting a partnership agreement was that a certain sum of the financial input that the company offers must go into the youth and children's activities. Few interviewees choose their partnerships entirely based on their personal interests. These kinds of partnerships were usually with the smaller companies.

One constant theme of the interviews was the fact that the companies look for local visibility which makes sense since most of the companies are small and medium sized companies and the nationwide visibility might not increase their sales or improve their business as much as getting local recognition and raised awareness of the company in the area. Many companies know that the league that MP for example plays is a nationwide league and they might get some nationwide exposure, but most said that is not something they need or look for in sponsoring deals. "All publicity is good publicity, but it is not something we see as an important factor for us" said one company's marketing coordinator when asked about whether they look for nationwide exposure.

When asking how the companies look for sponsoring opportunities the common answer was that they do not. Most of the companies do not look for sponsoring opportunities because the organizations that need sponsoring get in touch with the companies themselves. This is common with sports teams as they are far more likely to take the initiative to start the discussion about a partnership. Only one company said that they had offered to sponsor something in the past, and this was for a music event in the area they wanted to be part of.

Surprisingly, something that most of the companies emphasized strongly was that a part of the money the company invests in the teams should go to the youth and kids' activities. This is a way to ensure the good brand image that the company gains from associating with the team even if the men's team is not doing good. Also, many companies see this as their responsibility to improve public health. Associating with improving children's sporting opportunities is a very effective way of gaining positive brand image within the public for the companies.

Many companies only sponsor sport teams. Only the biggest companies had sponsored cultural activities such as local music events. Most interview subjects stated that the reason that most of their sponsoring revolves around sports is because the teams are more likely to get in contact and more straight forward with the partnership discussions. A big reason behind mostly sponsoring sports was the fact that they usually are the easiest to start and many companies had a long-lasting partnership with the team. Also, most companies felt that the sport teams were an easy way to gain local recognizability and brand awareness.

Interviewees said that they know what they get when they invest a certain sum of money and are aware of all the exposure, they get from the team but, not one company had any kind of evaluation system on how the sponsoring operations improve their business. Most of the companies only look that they get what the partnership deal promises them, but not at all if it is working or not in increasing their brand awareness in the area or anything else. Also, the companies do not take full advantage of the association with the team they pay for. The teams offer companies the possibility to sponsor a certain player of the team and in exchange they get their logo on the specific players shirt and the right to use them in their own marketing. Only one company had used a player in their marketing that they paid for according to the executive director of MP Mika Roivas. Other were satisfied with the logo in the players shirt.

90% of the interviewees said that they have a meeting with the sponsored team only once a year just before the season. Most of the companies are just happy with the company logo on the shirt or on the gameday flier offered to every spectator in the games. Only a small number of companies use MP or other their sponsored team in their own marketing even though it might be a good idea. MP has stated that if a company sponsors a certain player, they can use the player freely in their own marketing. So far this has not been popular amongst the companies.

It was clear that many companies did not have a clear understanding on what sponsoring means and their sponsoring activities were close to charity and they were satisfied with that. This might be a common trait in sponsoring in division football. This causes problems in creating effective and mutually beneficial partnerships and the development of the partnerships. The problem is based on the fact that small and medium sized companies do not have the resources or the know-how to build effective sponsoring deals and some don't even see sponsoring as a marketing tool but a financial support to local organizations. So many companies have sponsoring deals going on for many years that are closer to charity than sponsoring.

The biggest take away from the interviews was the fact that most of the partnerships are very elementary and they do not tick all the boxes of sponsoring. Many companies interviewed do not have a clear plan for the sponsoring and see it as a supporting rather than a business decision as sponsoring is. As many sponsors are gained through the connections and relationships of the board members the partnerships tend to be one-sided as the companies give money or other resources and do not see the return of the investment as important as they should. When the partnership deal

is one-sided, and the companies do not put in the time or effort to improve the partnership the development is slow and, in some cases, nonexistent. This puts all the responsibility to the sponsored party as the development ideas only come from them. Even with the companies that have a clear plan and vision on what they aim to gain from sponsoring the team the dialogue is too little if the company and the team have a development meeting once a year.

The common misconception of seeing sponsoring as a charitable support for local activities is a bad thing for both parties involved. This creates a situation where development is hard as there are no expectations from the sponsoring and if there are no expectations the sponsored organization is not compelled to improve themselves and therefore the criteria for it to be sponsoring are not met. This misconception is due to most sponsors in division football being small or medium sized companies and their limited resources and know-how on marketing communication.

Also, something that most of the companies emphasized strongly was that a part of the money the company invests in the teams should go to the youth and kids' activities. This is a way to ensure the good brand image that the company gains from associating with the team even if the men's team is not doing good. Also, many companies see this as their responsibility to improve citizens health. Associating with improving children's sporting opportunities is a very effective way of gaining positive brand image within the public for the companies.

## 6 CONCLUSION AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The starting point of this research was the researcher's personal interest in the topic. The goal was to produce usable information in improving MP's organization following their promotion. Sponsoring in more detail. This research provided with useful information and development suggestions for the team to use. As the researcher is close to the organization studied it was essential to knowingly recognize this and think objectively to create unbiased data and solutions.

Interviews had to be conducted via telephone and this made some information harder to gain as face-to-face interviews would have been more thorough. The number of interview subjects was also rather low, so the credibility of the research suffers a bit but still the results are directive.

The aim of the research was to understand sponsoring and through that improve the current and future partnerships of MP football team. After interviewing the sponsors and analyzing the answers must MP improve their own actions to add value for the sponsors' input. The most important findings were the fact that sponsors are rather lazy and do not put much effort into maintaining and developing the partnerships. This puts the team more responsible for developing the relationship as the companies can survive without the football club, but the club cannot properly function without the financial input of the sponsoring companies. Interviews show that local visibility is more important for companies than nationwide visibility. The interviews also indicated that companies more often than not do not see the sponsoring as a business decision rather than feel like it is just supporting your local activities and gaining positive association as by product. This misconception is a problem for developing the partnerships because if the companies see sponsoring as charity there is no motivation to improve the partnership.

For improving the sponsoring partnerships MP must develop their own operations to a higher level as they seek to become a bigger team in the future. The aim for the team is to get resources for their own activities from sponsoring so it is vital for the team to develop and maintain good relationships with the sponsoring companies. Also, with good partnerships they might gain new sponsors when other companies see the value the sponsoring grants the sponsoring companies.

First thing to address to improve their partnerships MP must improve their own organization. As they were promoted, they must improve in every aspect as a football team. This comes down to the basic definition of sponsoring as it is a business action that involves two separate organizations that benefit from each other. MP must make sure their own organization has a good brand, reputation and a fanbase that a sponsoring company wants to be associated with. Having limited resources this might be challenging but with a few adjustments the team can improve their organization cost efficiently. Improving the whole organization from a marketing point of view is key in adding value for the partnerships and gaining resources from the sponsors. Improving the things that sponsors feel important and what they feel would add value to the partnership must be taken into consideration, but the team also has to keep in mind their primary goal which is to improve the football club and not only exist for the sake of sponsoring companies. Improvements must benefit both the sponsors that help the team to operate and add value to the company's investments in the team.

Team should improve their marketing on the internet and social media as that is a big channel to reach fans and possible customers for the sponsors. Juniors need to be emphasized more as the sponsors want to be associated with them as it gives good brand image for them. Still as the sponsors want to support the youth the first team is the main source of income for the whole football club that makes the junior teams able to exist.

Internet and social media are an important channel to be active in today's marketing. This is a cheap way to improve the teams marketing as the resources are limited also, it is a way to reach more people than just the people that come to watch the games. Social media and other internet services are coming more and more important as the crowd is only about 1400 in a game for MP and due to recent restrictions in attendance amounts because of the COVID-19. This is a good number for a team that plays in Ykkönen, but the idea is to attract more viewers and through that more possible sponsors and money to improve the team. MP has social media presence in Facebook, Instagram and most recently Twitter. It is important to have them, but they must be properly managed for them to be beneficial and to avoid making silly mistakes that could possibly lead to losing sponsors and fans. All the social media channels should follow the same marketing plan and should be managed by the same person or team. Planning beforehand for social media posts should be done to maximize the exposure they get. Posts should follow the same theme and be of good quality. Currently the social media channels are run by different people and they do not have a clear plan, or they do not follow the exact same theme. A potential guideline is provided in the appendix 3. To increase the benefit for the sponsoring companies the partners should be brought up in their social media posts. Possible way to do this would be having the players use the sponsoring companies' services in their posts. For example, if the team has a sponsor that provides products or services that the team uses such as gyms, lunch places, physiotherapy clinics or other obvious services for athletes they could be easily included in their posts.

Keeping current sponsors and developing their partnerships should be an important thing to look after. It is easier to improve the current sponsor partnerships than to acquire new sponsors, especially now when the small and medium sized companies are taking a big hit due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Partnerships cannot be improved without dialogue between the team and the sponsoring companies. Most companies have only one clear development meeting in a year with the team representatives. I feel that this is something that could be an aspect to improve. Depending on the relationship with the team and the sponsor they should increase the number of meetings or lower the barrier for dialogue, so the improvement ideas do not get left unheard. Of course, the team knows better the opportunities and places to improve but it would be important for the sponsor to also give their ideas and when the dialogue is fluent without interruptions the improvements are easier to put into action. As what the team can do to improve this is to take contact with the sponsors more frequently and let the sponsors know that they are open for ideas from their side as well. Team cannot force companies to be more active in the sponsoring development. Only way to improve is to improve their own operations with the resources they have. By making the team more known and more professional the sponsors automatically get more out of the association with the team.

As many sponsors sought for local visibility the team should emphasize their local presence and their good reputation in the area. Small and medium sized companies saw that local recognizability and brand awareness was more important than nationwide visibility. This is an aspect that MP can use in their marketing by focusing on showing the public that local companies are supporting them and not only put the logos in their advertisement but indicating somehow that the sponsors are local businesses. Tailored solutions for each sponsor should be planned to get the best result. Development meetings and planning is crucial to get the best possible partnership. This benefits both the most when the partnership is tailored to the needs of both parties. In best case scenario this could create an idea that the whole area is behind MP and it might make other local businesses more likely to get involved with the team.

As the interviews pointed out the companies saw the support for juniors as a thing of high importance and wanted to be a part of the junior teams' actions. MP could use the juniors in their personal marketing more. This would amplify the fact that MP cares about their junior teams and looks after them. This could be done by increasing the publications and social media posts that include junior teams' events, so the public knows about the youth tournaments and games. This could increase the attendance in the children's events and would give a one more place to give sponsors more visibility and give the sponsors their desired association with junior's actions.

The matchdays should be also evaluated as they are the main events for the football team. Everything is done to ensure that everything goes well during the match days. The event is a window that showcases the whole team organization, and it is where the mental images and people's opinions about the club are made. So, it should go without a saying that everything should go smoothly, and visitors should enjoy themselves, even if the team does not get the result. As the season is in the summer and most of MP:s home games are on Sundays MP should test the attendance rates if some of their games were to be held on Saturdays. This would give them a clear idea on if the games are more beneficial to be held on certain days.

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## APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW STRUCTURE

## Basics

Name of company and number of employees

Name of interviewee and your position in the company

## Criteria for sponsorship targets

How do you decide what operations to sponsor?

What do you look for when conducting a sponsorship deal?

What are your motivations to sponsor something?

Is sponsoring budgeted yearly?

Do you aim for local visibility or aim for bigger area of visibility?

## Current sponsorships

What operations are you currently sponsoring? How long have you sponsored them?

Do you sponsor other operations than sports?

Are you happy with the current way of things in your sponsor deals? Do you think you get the value for money?

Are you aware of all the exposure your company gets through the sponsoring?

What do you expect when sponsoring sports? Are the goals set beforehand?

Is the progress monitored somehow?

Are development ideas shared with each other?

Is the sponsor used in the most effective way? If not how?

## Future plans

Does your company seek new sponsorship targets actively?

Is your company looking to increase, decrease or keep the level of sponsorships the same?

## APPENDIX 2: SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES FOR MP

### General rules on social media for the social media manager:

- Refrain from publishing posts and comments about other clubs, players, referees, or other controversial subjects.
- Identify all copyrighted and borrowed materials with proper citations and links. Give credit to the original published author when using quotations, ideas, videos, or photos of someone else.
- Avoid publishing personal opinions and ideas in teams' channels.

### Guidelines for increasing interaction and presence in social media:

- Plan posts beforehand. Evaluate timing of posts to get the most followers to see the posts. At what time is the follower base most likely to be active in the social media channel in question to gain maximum viewership.
- Post frequently to stay relevant. Frequent posts increase people's knowledge on what is going on with the team and makes them feel like they know what is always going on with the team.
- Decide on a theme that is followed in all the teams posts across all channels. Same colors, fonts, and artwork. This makes it easier to recognize the teams posts and associate them with other marketing as well.
- Post only quality content that works with the theme selected. Plan on what you want to publish so you are not in a rush to create quality content. Consider on acquiring a proper camera for photos and videos.
- Use players a lot, followers and fans are interested in the players so posting about them is a no-brainer.
- Even with the first team players being the main attraction use youth team players and their events in social media to show that MP is more than just the first team.