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M.B.A. Is MVP of Sports Management Industry, Some Say

*Students with sports M.B.A.’s may have an advantage over peers with master of arts or science degrees.*

By Menachem Wecker

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When undergraduate sports programs first surfaced in the 1970s, many academics mocked them for teaching "how to mix Gatorade," says Jim Riordan, director of Florida Atlantic University's M.B.A. in Sport Management program. Four decades later, sports management M.B.A., M.A., and M.S. degree programs are proliferating, but many professors and graduate school applicants still misunderstand them, he says.

"In sport, people think they're going to sit around all day and watch Derek Jeter take batting practice or Rex Grossman throw touchdown passes, and when you say to them, 'OK, let's look at a business plan, let's look at a pro forma, or let's do due diligence on a potential team sale or team evaluation,' they look at you like you have three heads," Riordan says. "My biggest challenge in accepting students today is separating the sports fan from the sports business student."

Baylor University, George Washington University, Georgetown University, New York University, University of Massachusetts—Amherst, and University of Michigan are among the 165 U.S. schools with graduate sports management programs listed on the website of the North American Society for Sport Management. The site, which doesn't separate types of master's degrees, also lists 176 undergraduate and 27 doctoral sports programs.

Alumni of the programs work in a variety of fields, from branding and marketing to working with sports apparel, and from college athletics to sports nonprofits. "Nearly 100 percent of our students change their mind about their professional goal after being exposed to something new in the industry during the course of the sports M.B.A. curriculum," says Scott Minto, director of San Diego State University's Sports Business Management M.B.A. program.

Some say that an M.B.A. can provide more professional flexibility than an M.A. or M.S. in sports. A. J. Maestas, president of the sports and entertainment company Navigate Research, chose to get an M.B.A. from Arizona State University's W.P. Carey School of Business instead of applying for an M.A. or M.S. in sports. Maestas says he was "hedging the risk that sports wouldn't work out, and industry segments would value an M.B.A. more."

But not all sports M.B.A. programs are created equally, professors and sports professionals say. Maestas, who has taught sports business at several schools, including Arizona State, Ohio University, NYU, and Northwestern University, says top programs help their students land jobs at the national level,
and second tier schools have good local networks. But the majority who are at the other schools "have little chance of the degree positively impacting their career," Maestas says. "The bottom tier of programs doesn't adequately reinvest in placement or networking."

The differences in the programs and the degrees can also lead to confusion. "You really have to be careful when you're a student choosing [a program] or when you're an organization hiring from one. Like [with] a lot of different programs, a lot of them are out there to be cash cows and to generate tuition revenues," says Florida Atlantic's Riordan. While the cash cows aren't necessarily academically rigorous, the serious programs have Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation, he says. And, Riordan adds, many sports management programs—such as his employer's—only consider applications from already admitted M.B.A. students.

Despite which program students choose, they should also avoid the popular misconception that the sports industry doles out high salaries, according to professors and sports industry professionals. "[T]he sports field in general does not pay as well, even with M.B.A.'s," says John Dato, general manager of the World Team Tennis team, New York Sportimes. "But it gets you in the door."

Some students find a way to get their feet in the door by applying for M.B.A.'s after completing an M.A. or M.S. in sports. Steve Postma decided to come to Florida Atlantic, where he is an M.B.A. student, after earning an M.A. in sports management from The University of Western Ontario in Canada. The M.A. program had a "heavy focus" on theory and on making more effective sports managers, Postma says, but he craved a program that would better prepare him for a career in sports marketing and event management.

As a student at Florida Atlantic, Postma has received what he views as a lot of industry experience. He interned for the NFL's Miami Dolphins and the Palm Beach County Sport Commission, and he will start a second internship with the Dolphins in January 2012.

Gordon Kaye, executive director and general manager of the Illinois-based Rockford Area Venues & Entertainment Authority—which runs an American Hockey League arena—also chose to get an M.B.A. after earning a graduate sports degree.

Kaye received an M.S. in sports administration from Indiana University—Bloomington's Kelley School of Business, and then an M.B.A. from Columbia Business School. "The M.S. program was a good stepping stone for me," he says. "The M.B.A. was more along the lines of: 'It's time to grow up.'"