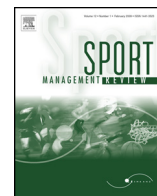




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## Managing a home court transition: The case of the New Zealand Breakers



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### ABSTRACT

This case study involving the New Zealand Breakers basketball team explores key factors relating to the home venues of sport teams. The case study is suitable for use in a variety of undergraduate courses such as sport management, sport marketing, and facility management. The New Zealand Breakers have two multi-purpose facilities within Auckland where home basketball games can viably be staged. Growing ticket demand and the opportunities associated with the larger and more modern of the two facility options have necessitated strategic thinking and decision making from Breakers' management. They have not yet made a permanent move, but have chosen instead to move to the new facility gradually. There are several aspects of the ongoing transition period that require careful management to ensure the long-term success of the franchise. The Breakers' management of the ongoing decision and transition are well-grounded in management, marketing, and facility management literature. As students consider the case, they will have the opportunity to think critically and consider theory in the context of a real professional sport franchise. A variety of questions and references are provided in the teaching note that can be used in conjunction with the implementation of the case study.

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### Teaching note

#### 1. Introduction

Auckland has two quite different, but viable facilities in which New Zealand Breakers home games can be staged. As the team's profile in Auckland has grown, Breakers' management has faced an important and ongoing decision. Moving permanently from the North Shore Events Centre (NSEC) on Auckland's North Shore to Vector Arena in the city centre was an appealing option, but would have come at the risk of alienating loyal fans who had been attending games at the suburban and much smaller facility on Auckland's North Shore. Breakers' management have instead gradually transitioned more games each season to the larger and more modern of the two facilities over the past four seasons.

The context and subsequent analysis associated with this case overlap somewhat with incidences more common in professional sport such as franchise relocation, overnight transition to new facilities within the same city, and one-off staging

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of matches at alternate facilities. However, the Breakers' decision to implement a gradual home court transition within Auckland is less common in the landscape of professional sport. In fact, the authors could not identify other specific examples of such a transition. There are several sport management related aspects of this case that require strategic management to ensure the long-term success of the franchise. The Breakers' management of the transition is well-grounded in management, marketing, and facilities literature.

As students consider the Breakers case, they will have the opportunity to think critically and consider theory in the context of a real professional sport franchise facing an ongoing decision and managing a facility transition. Within the case study, students are presented with market insights to consider. The intended learning outcome is for students to demonstrate critical thinking skills through the examination of relevant theory in the context of this real sport management case. Sport management, sport facility management, and sport marketing courses are ideal teaching contexts for this case. The following sections offer a variety of discussion questions which can be used in conjunction with the implementation of the case study in an undergraduate classroom. The questions will be useful for in-class discussions, on-line discussions, or assessments. The reference list provides additional resources relevant to the case.

## 2. Facilities

Facilities create an environment for sport fans in which their emotions, memories, and social connections are created (Stokvis, 2008). Fan satisfaction with sport facilities is important because it has been linked to repeat attendance (Hill & Green, 2000). Some fans view the facility as a place to socialise and connect with like-minded individuals, while those with a high degree of identification with a team may think of the facility as 'home' (Wiid & Cant, 2012). Given the importance of facilities to the fan experience, there are several aspects of the case study to consider and examine through this lens. These include the nature of and underlying rationale for franchise relocations, 'sportsapes', and the 'honeymoon effect.'

### 2.1. Relocation

The Breakers' move from NSEC to Vector Arena can be characterised as a facility relocation, although not in the most traditional format because of the gradual nature of the transition. Generally, facility relocations are permanent, occur at one point in time (i.e., start of a new season at a new facility) and involve a move within the same city or to a new city. There are several reasons why managers might initiate a permanent change. These include increased attendance (Gitter & Rhoads, 2014) and enhanced amenities (Wakefield, Blodgett, & Sloan, 1996). Increased value generated through broadcast rights at a new facility has also been cited as a reason for relocation (McEvoy, Nagel, DeSchraver, & Brown, 2005; Rascher & Rascher, 2004; Roy, 2008). Furthermore, a new facility may offer a more favourable lease agreement, and a new facility can also put a team in a preferential position when attempting to attract quality players (Rascher & Rascher, 2004). One of the main drawbacks of facility relocation is the risk of losing the fans' sense of attachment to the existing facility. In fact, the attachment to the team that is often fostered over numerous years is at risk of being broken when a team relocates to another facility (Stokvis, 2008).

Many teams around the world carefully consider and then subsequently stage games in a new facility or location as a one-off special event. The teams then return to their home facility afterwards. The staging of these games is often driven by a desire to explore new markets, increase gate receipts, and create interest in a unique event. Breakers' preseason games in Christchurch are one example of an attempt to achieve those objectives and so too are the New Zealand All Blacks' recent rugby test matches in Tokyo and Chicago. North American examples of this phenomenon include the National Football League's Buffalo Bills playing a regular season game outside their traditional market at Toronto's Rogers Centre each year from 2008 to 2013 and the National Hockey League's outdoor series, in which temporary ice rink facilities have been set up at much larger venues such as football and baseball stadia.

There is some overlap among facility relocation, sport as a one-off event, and the Breakers case. At the start of the transition to Vector Arena in 2011, games were staged in the city centre in part to explore viability and interest from alternate markets, similar to the opportunities managers might seek when staging a one-off event involving a team in a new location. The longer-term benefits that the Breakers seek from staging games at Vector Arena, including the enhanced amenities and potential for greater ticket revenue, are similar to those sought after by managers relocating a team to a new facility permanently.

### 2.2. Sportsapes

Structural attributes of facilities are vitally important to fans, particularly for those fans who are motivated to attend for reasons beyond the game spectacle itself. Wakefield et al. (1996) adapted the notion of sportsapes from Bitner's (1992) theory of servicescapes. The term has been used to describe the fixed elements of a facility's interior and exterior layout and design, including provision of space for parking. Through their own market research, the Breakers determined facility aesthetics and scoreboard quality were two factors that positively influenced their fans' game experience. The aesthetics of the facility influence first impressions enticing consumers to stay in the environment, while scoreboards provide entertainment during down periods of a game. Scoreboards are important to provide game statistics, video footage, and sponsor information. Scoreboards were the only sportscape attribute found in one study that significantly influenced

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