You started off in marketing outside of sport. In your mind, what are the major differences between marketing a more traditional product and a sport property?

I would say there are probably more similarities than differences. This is particularly true in a sports start up. From our perspective, starting up a women’s sports league is much like creating a new brand and trying to market that new brand to the appropriate audience. We try to encourage as much trial and repeat business and build loyalty along the way, which is translated in tickets sales and season tickets sales particularly.

With the WUSA, do you feel that you are marketing the league through your most recognized players like Mia Hamm, Brandi Chastain, and Julie Foudi?

Absolutely. When we were trying to go to market last year and telling people who we were, we made reference to the 1999 World Cup. The ability of the players to capture the soccer world and to have Americans embrace them the way they did after they won the ’99 World Cup, we really leveraged it, and it was easier for us to go to market and say, Mia, Brandy, Julie. They were household names after their success in 1999. We were very fortunate that we had all those players from the ’99 World Cup team in our league.

Now within the past 10 years, there have been two other start-up leagues, the WNBA and the MLS. You are a women’s league, so there is the WNBA as a potential model, and there is a soccer league, the MLS, another potential model. Have you looked to one more than the other in generating your marketing ideas?

A good thing. They are familiar enough with who we are that they are eager to come out and enjoy the WUSA experience.

The WUSA is a single-league structure. You have the franchise throughout the country. As a league, do you work with the franchises or are they left on their own to develop their strategies?

NAME: Lynn Morgan
TITLE: CEO Women’s United Soccer Association

When we originally established our business plan, we certainly looked to MLS, particularly because they are very similar in structure. Clearly they are the same sport, and there are a lot of similar components in terms of marketing with grass-root initiatives and things like that. From a WNBA standpoint, we really looked to them more in terms of marketing female athletes. What have they done successfully and what it takes for a league to be a success when it features women athletes. It is a relatively new phenomenon. We need to get the message out that, besides the fact that these women are superstars and the best in their field, they are also role models on the field as well. The real human interest story is about the complete package of our player.

Who do you consider to be your primary fan base?

Our primary target is the young soccer players particularly, the young girls from 6 to 17. Certainly those kids have to get to our game somehow, and I think that soccer moms and dads play an important role. We try to promote to both, but we target heavily on the young girl, because they perhaps aspire one day to be a Julie or Mia or Brandy. We really get out into the community and let the players connect with these young kids, and I think that the followup message to the mom and dad is your daughter asked you to go to a game and it is we work very closely with all of the teams and our success ultimately is going to be based upon how successful we are as eight teams in a league. We really try to think of ourselves as one company, which we are, with a parent office and eight branch offices. We share ideas across teams. We have weekly calls among the various departmental groups. We really do help each other out as much as we can; we do it to be efficient where we can sometimes share costs. In our advertising, we will do TV spots that have a league-branded message, but they can all be tagged locally in the market. We try to keep our message consistent as possible but still allow for the teams to have their own feel.

In the league you have some franchises in cities where there is an MLS franchise—for example, Washington, D.C.—and others where there is no franchise—for example, Carolina. What are the pros and cons of each situation?

Well, we actually have a joint marketing agreement with MLS, and we both understand that for soccer to be successful in this country, it is the responsibility of both of our leagues to continue to promote this game and to grow the soccer pie, so that we can each be successful. Currently, our audiences are fairly different, and in the markets where we have both the WUSA and an MLS team, we have had double
headers where we have back-to-back games and have one ticket for that event. We try to expose our individual fan bases to the other product ultimately trying to grow the popularity of professional soccer in the country.

The Carolina team is now playing in a soccer-specific stadium. How important is it for other franchises to do the same?

The soccer-specific stadium is such a critical piece of long-term success in my mind. Viewing soccer really needs to be an intimate experience for the fans. They need to be close. Particularly with our league because we really try in the community to create that connection with the fans. So after all of our games our players will sign autographs for the fans. The closer you can get the fans to action and the more you can engage them in the game on the field, ultimately the more success we will have. We certainly see soccer-specific stadiums as a real key to the overall experience and certainly the key to the growth of not only the WUSA but soccer in the country.

Move away from spectators for a moment, and talk in terms of sponsorship. What does the WUSA offer to sponsors?

Well, in a package they will get certainly, commercial inventory inside of our national and regional telecast, they get exposure during our games in the forms of field boards. Each of our games features a fan zone, a fun zone that is an interactive experience for the kids and families who are there. We offer exposure in those particular areas so they get that connection and branding opportunity again. We offer them unique sponsor nights and own a half-time if that is what they select. We try to create enhancement inside of the game telecasts that will give them opportunities for some increase branding. For instance, we have a feature that is carried in our national telecast now that is co-branded with Coke and McDonalds and it is called “Winning Moment.” We try to cap-

ture the celebration after the goal with McDonalds slogan “We love to see you smile.” We feature that during our game telecast, and we brand it very visibly with those two companies. Johnson and Johnson with their Acuvue product show the goal replay so you get a camera on the goal from the goalkeeper’s perspective, and we show the replay, and it is the Acuvue replay. We try to create opportunities like that, that not every advertiser will get, but we do try to get creative. The other thing that we do is offer them opportunities to be part of our grassroots initiative, and that seems to be very attractive to them in going with a WUSA team out into the community to a very targeted group of people and lets us carry their message to these young soccer players and families. That has been very popular with most of our sponsors.

Do you feel your demographic is more attractive than other sport properties knocking on the same sponsor’s door?

Well, I think it is very different. Our demographic is, as I said, much more of the American family. There are so many young soccer players in this country—it touches such a huge percentage of the American landscape. They also tend to be highly educated with high income. So clearly they are an attractive demographic for our sponsors. I think the fact that we deal in many cases with consumer brands and they are about locking in brand awareness, trial opportunities, and building loyalty throughout the life of their consumer. If we can get them in front of these young kids early on, they can develop brand loyalty through the life span of these kids. That is a real attractive thing for them. I know that so many other sports leagues do have very strong relationships with the corporate world as almost a fan base. We don’t have a lot of fans in our stands that are entertaining a business client. We tend to have lots of families and soccer enthusiasts. It is a more family environment as opposed to a business environment.

The NBA went through the experience the “Post Michael” era, even though he came back this year. Is there a concern about the post-“Mia, Julie, and Brandi” era?

Yeah, you know it has been interesting because Mia has been out all year already. She had knee surgery prior to the start of the season, and she has yet to play this year. If you look at our attendance figures through our first six weeks, we are on par with the games we played last year taking out Mia. She clearly has a huge impact on attendance, certainly—awareness—and we recognize the fact there won’t be the Mia, Julie, Brandy. What we have tried to do already is begin to promote some of the new rising stars. We have had a number of players that through participation in the league last year have gotten call-ups to the national team and potentially will compete for the women in the World Cup next year. We definitely recognize that it is our responsibility to start branding tomorrow’s star so that the community will continue to support this league and we don’t have to be incredibly reliant on the names that they know currently. We are still very young, and I hope that we can count on some of the superstars sticking with us for a few more years and giving us a chance to build a foundation.

Are there any concerns about an attendance drop for the second year?

We are certainly hoping not to have that happen. It is pretty well documented that you head into a second phase and then you experience what they call a sophomore slump. I think that if we look at our attendance from last year, obviously our inaugural game last year drew over 34,000 which gave us a huge spike in our total attendance figures. We did not have that this year; I think that right now we feel that we are staying at a steady and consistent level. Our goal all year has been to show improvement, if we
show improvement by one more fan coming this year than last year, we think this a huge success because we avoided that slump. It is something that we will always be focused on and it will be our responsibility to provide an opportunity and reason for fans to come out to our games. We recognize that we are competing for entertainment dollars, I see us competing with the movies and theme parks and even the malls to a large degree. We have to provide the opportunity for kids to want to come out and their parents to want to bring them and enjoy our games.

**What do you think the greatest challenge is for the WUSA?**

I think one of the challenges clearly is continuing to show growth in our ticket sales, TV rating, and corporate support. I think the good news is there are all kinds of opportunities for us to grow. We need to focus on our primary revenue streams while identifying some of the unique revenue streams we might begin to create today that will show growth in the future. We are right now doing some international TV syndication, which currently will not prove to be a real large revenue stream for us, but we know that it is exposing the WUSA into a number of other countries. We look at that, we are still currently getting rights for our games in these countries, which I think is a real positive in itself but can that become a way for us to continue to grow certainly financially but also from a branding standpoint globally. This will also help us attract more international players to the league. We are also looking at increasing the development of our licensing and merchandising programs so that we can begin to have our products available not only in our stadiums but in a number of retail outlets. Again, we have to focus on the core while keeping our eye on those other opportunities that will help us long term.

Your investors seem as if they are in for the long haul, despite the fact that it may take several years to turn a profit. They got into this certainly coming on the heels of the 1999 Women’s World Cup, and they understood that this is a wonderful opportunity to provide so much to so many young up-and-coming soccer players. It was the right thing to do, and they got into this with their eyes open knowing that. While I don’t think they are wanting to lose money forever, I certainly believe that they understand this will take patience and time. We are trying to be very fiscally responsible in the way we build this league. Salaries are not exorbitant. We don’t have outlandish marketing expenses. The investors are clearly in this for reasons other than making money. I think that if we could achieve our goal to break even and the league would be a self-funding proposition in the next five years, I think it would be a success in the investors’ minds. In a lot of ways this is not only an investment but also a promotional opportunity for the investors. We carry a lot of our matches on the cable system that are part of our investment group, and they see this as branding in a lot of ways just like sponsors pay money to be apart of our league. Our investors get to capitalize on the benefit of being a part of this league, and certainly the creators of this league, and they benefit from that.

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Interview by SMQ Profile Editor
Matthew Robinson.