

Arrowhead's Aerial Attack: A qualitative analysis of fan reactions
toward a franchise's quarterback selection

By

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Abstract

This case study utilized qualitative methodologies in order to gather the sentiments of Kansas City Chiefs fans realized during the 2018 regular season. The study focuses upon the Chiefs' decisions in the composition of their roster, with regard to risk and fan identification. This work is provided and conducted with the purpose of contributing to sport management professionals a source for understanding how one franchise's potentially risky player transactions were perceived by its fans, and how those transactions might have affected identification with the team. Individual interviews of 12 Chiefs fans were conducted to gather fan sentiment. The ensuing analysis of that data provided the themes that represent the results of the study. In total 17 themes prevailed from the study, those themes range from community impacts, perceived negligence on the Chiefs' part, to causes of angst and excitement.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
Chapter I: Introduction	1
Chapter II: Literature Review	3
NFL Draft	3
Team Identification	9
Chiefs’ Situational Context	12
Chapter III: Methods	17
Design	18
Data Collection	19
Analysis	20
Chapter IV: Results	21
Positive Fan Sentiment	21
appreciable aggressiveness.....	22
second chance.....	23
confidence.....	24
excitement.....	25
unwavering support.....	26
seriousness.....	27
go for it, take chances.....	28
Negative Fan Sentiment	30
negligence.....	30
lopsided transactions.....	32
undesirable player stigmas.....	34
blatantly welcoming risk.....	35
costliness.....	36
location drawbacks.....	37
forced hand.....	39
apprehension, reluctance.....	40
Other Findings	41
community.....	41
reasonable expectations.....	42
Chapter V: Discussion	43
Practical Implications	48
Limitations	48
Considerations for Future Research	48
References	50
Appendix A: Interview Guide	57

Chapter I: Introduction

This case study is an attempt to understand and qualify how the decisions of professional sport franchises in the composition of their rosters may impact fan identification. The conceptualization of this work was brought about by the Kansas City Chiefs of the National Football League with their selection of quarterback Patrick Mahomes in the 2017 NFL Draft, and the franchise's eventual trading of veteran quarterback Alex Smith. The actions by the Kansas City franchise are not necessarily unique on the surface, as player turnover at the professional level is constant for even the league's most prolific of franchises (Arkush, 2017). However, given that Smith had proven capable and competent during his time in Kansas City, the Chiefs' moves were seemingly in an acceptance of risk with regard to the immediate future of the team (Davis, 2018). For managers engaging in potentially hazardous courses of action, "in cases in which a given alternative promises a good enough return but presents an unacceptable danger, managers focus on ways to reduce the danger while retaining the gain" (March & Shapira, 1987, p. 1410). Therefore, it is possible that in this instance, with Mahomes' selection, the franchise's leaders were aware that they were operating with a tolerance for risk based upon the club's perceived needs, and would attempt to implement measures to mitigate those risks. Furthermore, "almost every individual-level or organizational-level decision is made under consideration of multiple needs, and thus understanding how people prioritize multiple reference points of need provides insight into shaping and understanding organizational decision-making" (Gonzales, Mishra, & Camp, 2017, p. 471).

As each individual NFL franchise is its own firm that operates in accordance with the provisions set forth by the league, and the league itself to date, retains a monopoly (Garubo Jr., 1987) over professional football in the United States, each franchise is thus left to measure its

organizational success as a firm, relative to the others within the league. And, depending upon how well a given franchise has performed will dictate their tolerances/aversions toward risk(s), because there is a “lower propensity to take risk as performance declines among firms with low and high performance than among firms with moderate performance” (Miller & Chen, 2004, p. 113). The league and its franchises depend upon fan interest in order to generate revenue, and to ultimately remain viable. If fans are unwilling to attend and/or watch contests, then a franchise may find itself in peril.

The case of the recently relocated Los Angeles Chargers provides a considerable example as to how a lacking fan base can create turmoil for an individual franchise, and the league as well. In October of 2018, the Chargers revealed that the franchise would decrease its revenue goals for the year 2020 from \$400 million to only \$150 million, due largely to an inability to sell personal seat licenses (Bieler, 2018). Such a drastic downturn in anticipated revenue stemming from a lack of fan interest and support functions as a reminder to sport managers how critical a strong fan base is for the sustainability of the firm. The concept of giving fans a stake in a team’s direction and an ability to participate in the club’s decision making will create for a greater sense of affiliation, and in turn, reinforce/foster team identification (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997).

This case study borrows from these concepts and attempts to qualify how the decisions of professional sport managers may affect fan identification, when they assemble their player rosters. As such this work draws upon previous literature in sport management that focuses upon professional sport drafts and team/fan identification. The investigation’s methods and results are also contained in the following chapters. Finally, this thesis concludes with a discussion that also includes practical implementations, limitations, and considerations for future research portions.

This work is provided and conducted with the purpose of contributing to sport management professionals a source for understanding how one franchise's potentially risky player transactions were perceived by its fans, and how those transactions might have affected identification with the team.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The research utilized as the basis for this investigation is contained and laid out within this section. First, research on the NFL draft is presented pertaining to the behaviors of franchises in their drafting behaviors and decisions. Also, the research outlines the significance of where players are drafted and their eventual success performing in the NFL. Next, team identification research is presented for understanding in how fans develop an affinity and allegiances to their teams as a result of socio-psychological factors as they pertain to the behaviors of groups. Last, a contextual section is provided regarding the Kansas City franchise's actions and the circumstances leading up to the selection of Mahomes in the draft. And also, some of the key roster transactions undertaken in recent seasons, preceding the execution of this study.

NFL Draft

Professional sports' drafting processes offer to academics and fans opportunities for inquiry and intrigue. Both the National Football League and National Basketball Association's drafts are carried on primetime television. Both drafts are deliberately scheduled relative to the rest of their respective league's seasons in order to not only allow franchises adequate time to scrutinize prospective talent, but to also maintain the interest of fans during periods without contests. With regard to the spectacle of pro sports' drafts, "NBA Commissioner Adam Silver and the league's players and teams have managed to make pro basketball nearly a year-round

obsession, like the NFL, MLB and national politics” (Rosenthal, 2018). Scholars have investigated the NFL Draft itself for decades, most notably through the economic lens of cost-benefit analyses. While somewhat dated, an investigation of NFL draft selections in 2005 concluded:

Teams have not fully come to grips with the implications of the salary cap, a relatively new innovation. Buying expensive players, even if they turn out to be great performers, imposes opportunity costs elsewhere on the roster. Spending \$10 million on a star quarterback instead of \$5 million on a journeyman implies having \$5 million less to spend on offensive linemen to block or linebackers to tackle. (Massey & Thaler, 2005, p. 39)

Draft processes themselves create for each franchise opportunities to implement a course of action through which to augment their on-field talent for the coming season(s). In the National Football League draft positioning is “determined by the reverse order of finish in the previous season. Barring any trades between clubs, each round starts with the team that finished with the worst record and ends with the Super Bowl champions” (National Football League Football Operations Department, 2018). Each pick throughout the process of the draft is fundamentally less-valuable than those prior, and the selections within the first round of the draft tend to receive the greatest levels of scrutiny and intrigue.

The draft itself offers a significant deal of gamesmanship outside of the field of play. Each pick available to a franchise offers an opportunity, while each selection by the club’s adversaries eliminates a range of possibilities until that franchise has the opportunity to exercise their next selection. Those involved in the deliberations concerning the assessments of talent are charged to execute critical roles that provide often-serious implications for their franchises.

Caporale and Collier (2015) analyzed NFL drafts from 2003-2013 and discovered that a 12-pick improvement in average draft position resulted in one additional victory for the ensuing regular season. Given the NFL's 16 game season each individual game is of greater consequence relative to other professional sport leagues that may have five to ten times as many scheduled contests within their regular seasons. In the most extreme circumstances seven wins during an NFL regular season has twice proven sufficient for a team to win their division, and by default compete in the postseason (Chase, 2015). Caporale and Collier (2015) additionally attributed on-field success for teams to franchise owners whose actions demonstrate more than a desire to maximize profit, but rather a willingness to necessarily spend more on payroll to acquire greater talent, including processes for attaining higher drafting positions.

Franchises have only a few methods to be positioned nearest the beginning of the draft or towards the front of a particular draft round. A franchise will have had to either performed poorly on the field in the previous season, have acquired the selection of another team who had less-success in the year prior by way of previous trades, or to trade while the draft is actually occurring. While Caporale and Collier (2015) found success to be attributable to franchises having higher average draft positions, Hersch and Pelkowski (2016) found that players acquired by teams that had 'traded up', the process of trading to gain a higher draft selection, offered greater contributions to their teams. Hersch and Pelkowski (2016) analyzed the first three seasons of NFL players, excluding kickers and punters, selected in the draft between 1984 and 2011, and reasoned that:

Players acquired by teams trading-up provide a greater contribution. This can be interpreted as there being too few trades during the draft. That is, teams too often retain their draft rights. A likely cause is the transaction costs associated with the difficulty of

finding a trade partner and negotiating terms in a fluid, fast-paced environment. An additional impediment to trading may be the increased media scrutiny that trades often attract and the fear of being second-guessed. (p. 518)

Franchises that are capable of engaging in transactions that allow them to trade up are paying a premium in order to acquire whomever it is that they intend to draft with the selection for which they paid. Not only are there financial costs to these maneuvers, but also secondary costs like the potential for additional scrutiny from media that may prove detrimental. While some explorations have found that being higher, or trading up to be higher in the draft to be beneficial, others have found instead, that trading up is not necessarily always appropriate.

Gaining the ability to have access to the largest pool of players by way of trading up requires some expense. In order to move up in the draft, a franchise will have had to have sacrificed something along the way. While access to the greatest amount of selections also presents a franchise with the most potential opportunity, the value of their picks can impact their decisions to move up or down, or to remain in their established position within a draft. Through examination of 147 players selected within the first three rounds of the 2011, 2012 and 2013 NFL drafts, Kraeutler, Carver, Belk, and McCarty (2018) found that with regard to the relative weight of their salaries, teams can expect a greater value out of those drafted in the second and third rounds to those drafted in the first round. Kraeutler et al. (2018) offer that from a financial standpoint coaches and executives in some circumstances may be better off to 'trade down' than to 'trade up'. While first round and overall higher selections might have the greatest potential impact at one given position on a team, the overall value of draft picks relative to the needs of the team impacts talent acquisition processes.

Utilizing draft pick values, number of first round selections, and next season winning percentages from NFL seasons 2000-2010 Reynolds, Bonds, Thompson, and LeCrom (2015) suggest that accrual of draft pick value is more important than attaining the highest possible selection. They conclude by proposing that, that trading to acquire the greatest amount of value is strategically superior relative to the expenditures required for attaining the best sole selection (Reynolds, Bonds, Thompson, & LeCrom, 2015). With regard to quarterbacks specifically, there is evidence that even those selected at the very top of drafts, picks 1-10, are not altogether greater additions than those picked later. Using quarterbacks who competed in at least one NFL contest and were drafted between 1970 and 2007, Berri and Simmons (2011) conceived that quarterbacks selected between picks 11-90 are often as, or more effective and valuable than those selected in the top ten. Pairing the potential that better players may actually be found later in drafts rather than earlier, with the actual monetary and opportunity costs of higher selections, the potential improvement of the team at all positions rather than just one with a high selection may be of greater benefit to franchises.

Seemingly trading up, down, or staying put in the drafting process requires a great deal of scrutiny and an appreciation for risk. Hazard mitigation in the draft process often utilizes the success of players' collegiate success. Utilizing the 1,225 players that had completed all NFL Combine events, were subsequently drafted, ranked by scouts, and that had played for a BCS school from drafts from 1999-2012, examination displayed that players' collegiate affiliations matter only to their initial entry into the league; and that free agency necessarily sorts players based on performance (Kitchens, 2015). Applying results from the 2009 NFL Draft, Hartman (2011) supplements information regarding collegiate performances by showing that total yardage for running backs selected was the principal predictor draft placement. Adding that, it is

advisable for sport scientists to defer to on-field performance over combine results (Hartman, 2011). Where and how well one performs in college offers to those making the final decision on whom to select in drafts the largest record of data from which to base their selections.

Ultimately though, those who execute draft selections are accountable for those picks and the eventual success and failure of the team based upon those decisions. Owners of franchises employ scouting departments to dutifully assess talent, coaches to orient and guide that talent, and executives to oversee those processes among others within the firm's agenda. While talent acquisition requires all concerned to contribute to the process, the General Manager and other executives are looked to as the faces of authority on those brought into the organization. Boulier, Stekler, Coburn, and Rankins (2010) after analyzing the success and failure of executives making selections of quarterbacks and wide receivers, and their eventual performance over four years of play from the drafts of 1974 through 2005; concluded that executives are proficient, but not perfect in ranking players in a draft class relative to one another. Thus franchises that actually desire victories require executives that, as pickers, are at least better than average at talent acquisition through the draft process. Motomura, Roberts, Leeds and Leeds (2016) examined 549 individual National Basketball Association team seasons from 1995 to 2013 and found that having the appropriate/better executives to do the picking in drafts, was of greater benefit to franchises, than having higher or more draft picks. Motomura et al. (2016) establish that very good organizations and managers succeed regardless of draft position.

In order for the franchises within the National Football League to succeed they likely first require talented executive-level individuals to procure their players. The heads of the franchise should possess the competencies necessary to weigh the costs and benefits of jockeying to move in either direction of the draft. Circumstances and the potential of those already on the roster

serve to dictate at least a portion of information from which franchises are capable of making the best of their opportunities. The athlete from the high-profile school may retain the initial advantage over the next-best option, based on biases attributable to their collegiate institution's prestige. While the more valuable player over the duration of multiple seasons, can actually be acquired with a later selection, make greater contributions, and be relatively more valuable over time.

Team Identification

Hunt, Bristol, and Bashaw (1999) described sports fans as those consumers who are enthusiastically motivated by sports. Much of the inquiry that has been carried out regarding the sociopsychological position of the sport fan has been through the lenses of social-identity theory. Tajfel and Turner (1979) posited that individuals that identify as a member of a group, through the use of social categorizations, will take measures to reinforce the self-image and position of those within their respective groups, while relegating the social standing of those that do not belong to that group. Tajfel and Turner (1979) supplement the concept of social categorizations with the following:

Social categorizations are conceived here as cognitive tools that segment, classify, and order the social environment, and thus enable the individual to undertake many forms of social action. But they do not merely systematize the social world; they also provide a system of orientation for self-reference: they create and define the individual's place in society. (p. 40)

Individuals' identifying with their respective groups generates the possibility of intergroup conflict so long as there is a reward attainable, through competition, for one of the groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The concepts put forth by social-identity theory assist in understanding how intergroup conflicts, for better or worse, have been commonplace throughout history. Identification with a group and the desire to maintain/achieve the rewards that coincide with societal security, in its most absolute and extreme forms have aided in the mobilization of a dictatorial attempt at ethnically cleansing Europe under the Third Reich (Theiler, 2003). Similarly and more recently in 2016, helped to facilitate the coalescence of a distinct portion of the American constituency, in their electing the 45th President of the United States upon the ideals of nationalism (Carpenter, 2017). And, in relatively frivolous application, for these purposes, allows for sports fans the willingness and ambition to spend several hours in the cold of American winters, in open-air stadiums; if only for an opportunity to witness a victory of their football team over an opponent for the gratification that coincides with a win. Wins are most significant in terms of enjoyment for the highly identified fan. Where as highly identified fans after a loss, and lesser-identified fans after a win or a loss experience less enjoyment after witnessing their teams contend (Wann & Schrader, 1997).

Considerable exploration into the behaviors of sports fans has been undertaken to get at how and why fans become devoted and allegiant to their favorite teams. The most confident of individuals that are highly identified with their teams, have been found to carry their fandom as a point of pride in themselves (Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000). Additionally, for the most devout and committed of fans, balancing their team's successes and failures can prove laborious depending upon how successful the team may currently be performing.

Because highly identified persons maintain their allegiance even in trying times, they must develop other strategies, such as selective attributions, to maintain their positive social identity, whereas those low in identification are less likely to use these strategies

because they simply "jump ship" subsequent to negative outcomes. (Wann & Dolan, 1994, p. 790)

Self-affirmation and confidence are therefore related to the sports fan's self-esteem and psyches. While highly identified individuals may find a way to spin their team's misfortunes to their perceived benefit, those who are less troubled by their team's struggles may simply find another means of bettering their disposition by seeking gratification elsewhere.

Gau and Kim (2011) found that the individualistic nature of American society relative to other, Eastern, societies allows for higher levels of identification by Americans with their favorite teams. The applications of social identity theory to team identification extend beyond the field of play and contest outcomes as well.

Sport fans are not immune to the unscrupulous off-field acts of athletes. In fact, such acts have a negative impact on team identification levels, particularly when the response by team leaders was perceived to be weak and lenient. This is especially true for those with the highest levels of team identification. (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009, p. 153)

For the highly identified fan, the actions of a team's personnel have consistent implications constantly, not simply while the team is performing during the season. In examining the development of team identification with fans of Sydney FC, Lock, Taylor, Funk and Darcy (2012) utilized the recollections of 21 of the club's fans to qualify the development and growth of identification over time, since the club's inaugural season. Lock et al. (2012) found that fans' differentiating individual players based upon their value to the club, rather than simply the collective of all the players as a whole helped to facilitate the identification process. With the information resulting from analysis of 91 respondents' replies to a survey into how and why they follow their current favorite teams, or had stopped following a former favorite team; Wann,

Tucker, and Schrader (1996) found that the presence, or lack of presence of specific players was the second most prominent cause in identification to the team's success in both cases.

Chiefs' Situational Context

As previously stated the maneuvers by Kansas City are not unique in terms of the actions themselves on behalf of the organization. Players are traded, cut, waived, and demoted both during the season and offseason. What makes the example here a point of intrigue is that the Chiefs did not necessarily appear to have a glaring, imminent need at the quarterback position at the time of the 2017 draft. The Chiefs' starting quarterback at the time of Mahomes' selection in the draft was Alex Smith, the 2005 draft's first selection overall (Reischel, 2018). Smith had been the franchise's starter since 2013. During his tenure, Smith made the roster for the Pro Bowl in both 2013 and 2016 preceding the Mahomes selection, and again in 2017 following the acquisition of Mahomes (Pro Football Reference, 2018). Additionally, in Smith's five seasons with the Chiefs, he played in and started 76 contests, with a win-loss record of 50-26, a winning percentage slightly greater than 65 percent (Pro Football Reference, 2018). The Chiefs also won their division in back to back years in 2016 and 2017, a feat the franchise had not accomplished through the entirety of its 57 seasons in competition (Pro Football Reference, 2018). With Smith, Kansas City reached the postseason in four of five seasons, 2014 being the outlier. In the postseason however Smith and the Chiefs were only victorious in one of five contests throughout his tenure (McDowell, 2018).

The Chiefs 'traded up' in the draft in order to select Mahomes, the process of trading up itself is not necessarily in and of itself all that rare a maneuver. The selection of Mahomes from Texas Tech instead of Clemson's Deshaun Watson, by Kansas City provoked both enthusiasm and apprehension from fans (Taylor, 2018). Watson was twice a finalist for the Heisman Trophy

(Fravel, 2016), and Clemson had recently prevailed in the collegiate national championship over the persistent powerhouse, Alabama. Watson in the defeat of Alabama was nothing short of sensational. Watson accumulated 420 yards and three touchdowns passing, and also rushed for 43 yards and one touchdown (Sports Reference, 2018). The Tigers' overcoming Alabama ranked near the top in terms of upsets in the modern era of college football (Paine, 2017). The game itself was also significant in that Watson and the Tigers were able to take down the Crimson Tide, overcoming a double-digit deficit in the second half, which no team had done in the 97 contests in which Alabama had held such a lead under head coach Nick Saban (Fornelli, 2017).

Statistically, both Patrick Mahomes' and Deshaun Watson's collegiate careers were prolific. They were both freshmen in 2014 at their respective schools, and both remained with their programs for the duration of their careers. At the time of the 2017 draft both quarterbacks had completed their junior years and opted to attempt to ascend into the National Football League. Both the 2015 and 2016 seasons offered the two their time to shine as their school's starters. In 15 games from 2015-16 at Texas Tech Mahomes compiled 9,705 passing yards, 77 touchdowns, and 25 interceptions (Sports Reference College Football, 2018). During that same span through the air in 30 games at Clemson, Watson threw for 8,706 yards, 76 touchdowns, and 30 interceptions (Sports Reference College Football, 2018). Both quarterbacks also proved to be formidable to their opposition when rushing. Mahomes' 741 yards and 22 touchdowns (Sports Reference College Football, 2018) are certainly not inconsequential. However, Watson's legs and rushing prowess were statistically superior in terms of yardage. Watson was able to amass 1,734 yards and 21 touchdowns on the ground (Sports Reference College Football, 2018). While both proved to be up to the task as signal callers for their schools, the issue of competition should not be overlooked with respect to the quality of opposition that both quarterbacks faced during

their 2015 and 2016 collegiate campaigns. Looking to the larger picture of the college football landscape from a competitive perspective in the 2015 and 2016 seasons reveals starkly different platforms upon which Mahomes and Watson were able to showcase their talents. Mahomes' success at Texas Tech, competing in the Big XII Conference may not have been as difficult to achieve as Watson's in the Atlantic Coast Conference.

In 2015, in terms of total defense, of 127 FBS schools ranked, Big XII football teams had no schools within the top 25 (National Collegiate Athletics Association). Only one school, Oklahoma, was within the top 50, at 34th (National Collegiate Athletics Association). Five of the ten Big XII programs were ranked worse than 100th, with Texas Tech next to last at 126th, only surpassed by Kansas (National Collegiate Athletics Association). In 2016, the Big XII as a conference, again performed less than ideally defensively. This time not one, single Big XII program ranked within the top 50, of the now 128 FBS schools (National Collegiate Athletics Association). In 2016, only three of the Big XII's schools were ranked beyond 100th (National Collegiate Athletics Association). In 2016 however, Texas Tech football was the worst in terms of total defense, 128th, allowing 554.3 yards per game, nearly 100 yards more than the conference's next worst performer, Kansas, at 446.2 yards per game (National Collegiate Athletics Association).

While Big XII defenses were struggling, to say the least, in 2015 and 2016 the Atlantic Coast Conference, more commonly known as the ACC, proved far more formidable from a defensive perspective. In 2015, the top-ranked defense in terms of total defense, within the FBS, came from the ACC, in Boston College allowing only 254.3 yards per game (National Collegiate Athletics Association). Additionally, four schools, including Clemson at tenth, were within the top 25 (National Collegiate Athletics Association). An additional five schools were within the

top 50 (National Collegiate Athletics Association). And no school of the conference's 14 schools ranked worse than 98th (National Collegiate Athletics Association). In 2016, the ACC's defensive competence was even greater than the year prior. Half of the ACC's schools placed within the top 25 of total defense, with Clemson having the high mark at eighth (National Collegiate Athletics Association). From the perspective of both statistics and conditioning against difficult competition, seemingly Watson was at an advantage over Mahomes to prospective teams at the professional level.

After Smith was traded to the Washington franchise in the Spring of 2018, saving the franchise \$15.6 million (Paylor, 2018), Mahomes became the Chiefs' starting quarterback. While Mahomes had served adequately in the role during the Chiefs' regular season finale in 2017 (Paylor, 2018), an away game at intra-divisional rival Denver, he had yet to truly be an uncontested starter in the NFL. As of the first week of November 2018 Mahomes had started in ten NFL games. Before even the completion of Mahomes' tenth start he had achieved the most yards and passing touchdowns of any quarterback since 1950, in the same amount of starts (Goldman, 2018). Through the ninth game of the 2018 season Mahomes' touchdown to interception ration was above four, with 29 scores and 7 interceptions (Larrabee, 2018). By the end of September, one month into the season, Mahomes had one of the ten best-selling jerseys nationally (Kerkhoff, 2018).

While Mahomes' statistics up until the middle of the 2018 season proved awesome, the Chiefs as a team were equally as impressive, from the perspective of wins and losses. The club had only fallen to the New England Patriots on the road by a field goal, in a game in which the odds makers had them losing by just more than three points (Fucillo, 2018). For all their offensive and winning success through the ninth week of the season, the Chiefs' defensive

capabilities were lacking. The club had allowed an average of 427.4 yards per game to opposing offenses through week nine, a category in which they ranked next to last (The National Football League). Kansas City was also surrendering 25.1 points per game, roughly a point and a half more than those teams ranked at 16th, the middle of the category, again through nine weeks (The National Football League).

Prior to the 2018 season's beginning, the Chiefs' odds at winning the Super Bowl were tied with three other teams at 20:1 (CBS Sports, 2018). Two teams within the Chiefs' division were deemed equally or more likely to win the Super Bowl (CBS Sports, 2018). And, seven teams within the Chiefs' conference, including Deshaun Watson's Houston Texans, were deemed equally or more likely to win the title (CBS Sports, 2018). Midway through the season, after only eight games, the Chiefs had earned by way of odds makers a 99 percent chance at reaching the postseason, just less than 90 percent odds at winning their division, were tied with New England at 29.56 percent to prevail in the conference, and trailed only the Patriots and Rams in likelihood to win the Super Bowl (Skiver, 2018). All told, halfway through his first season as a starting NFL quarterback, the Mahomes selection by the Chiefs had appeared to have paid off. Mahomes was being heralded as a talent that only comes around once each generation (Pryor, 2018) without having completed an entire season.

In addition to the dilemma of Mahomes' selection and Smith's trading, there were two wide receivers on the Chiefs roster in the 2018 season that were subject to scrutiny each for their own circumstances. Tyreek Hill, the Chiefs' fifth round draft selection in the 2016 draft, prior to his selection, had been convicted of domestic abuse by strangulation and was serving three years of probation at the time of his selection (Bell, 2016). Hill's selection served to draw the ire of a considerable portion of the Chiefs' fan base (Grathoff, 2016). In his second season, 2017, Hill

had proven to be capable of qualifying as one the NFL's elite wide receivers (Conner, 2018). This was due to his high probability to catch balls thrown in his direction, and the generation of yards from those catches (Conner, 2018). Near the time that Alex Smith's trade to Washington became official, the Chiefs also proceeded to sign Sammy Watkins, a wide receiver coming off of a one-season stint with the Los Angeles Rams. The Chiefs agreed to a deal that would pay Watkins a total of \$48 million over three years (The Associated Press, 2018), a deal that made Watkins the fourth highest-paid receiver in the league (Tomlinson, 2018). Prior to 2017 in Los Angeles, Watkins spent his first three seasons as a professional in Buffalo, dealing with lingering foot issues and underperforming relative to his draft selection of fourth overall in 2014 (Daniels, 2018). The Chiefs had attempted to trade for Watkins in 2017, while he was still in Buffalo, but were not capable of agreeing to terms with the Bills (Thorman, 2018). Getting Watkins a year later however, seemingly proved a better proposition for Kansas City, because in 2017 Watkins had not been limited or held out of a contest due to injury (Tomlinson, 2018).

Chapter III: Methods

This case study utilized qualitative methodologies in order to gather the sentiments of Kansas City Chiefs fans realized during the 2018 regular season. The study focuses upon the Chiefs' decisions in the composition of their roster, with regard to risk and fan identification. Foremost, a qualitative design was deployed because of the specific and precise nature of investigation, for which there has been little previous exploration. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) offered that, "qualitative researchers undertake a qualitative study because there is a lack of theory or existing theory fails to explain a phenomenon" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 17).

Design

Each year new players receive hype and praise from media as they advance to the national spotlight, in 2018; the case of Mahomes outperforming expectations (Jones, Benoit, Kahler, & Marston, 2018) exhibits this tendency. Additionally, given the nature of his consistently record-breaking performance, combined with the absence of such a prolific passer among the 34 other quarterbacks in Kansas City's franchise history (Teicher, 2018), what transpired with the Chiefs at the quarterback position during the 2018 season is both extraordinary and remarkable. The Chiefs' decision to draft and eventually start Mahomes, served to initiate the conceptualization of this study. Consideration was then given to other seemingly questionable or risky maneuvers on the Chiefs part in recent years. In order to attempt to gain a more comprehensive result, the following Chiefs decisions were subsequently added to the investigation. The first additional factor was the decision to draft Tyreek Hill who had encountered legal troubles in his collegiate career. The next, was the trading of veteran and former number one overall draft selection, quarterback, Alex Smith. And the final factored action, was the free agent acquisition of the somewhat injury-prone wide receiver in Sammy Watkins.

The author's exploration into previous relevant works netted no instances in which fans were accessed concerning one or more individual positions on a given team. Nor, was any research found that had examined how a draft selection affected fans. Additionally, no works had been found to have investigated how the acquisition of one player and/or the dispensing of another impacted the level of team identification for fans. This study was ultimately, distinctly designed to investigate these issues.

Data Collection

Participant selection and engagement occurred through 12 single interviews that were conducted with each of the study's individual participants. Prior to each interview, each participant was provided an overview of the scope of inquiry, and permitted to ask any questions with regard to the process itself. Upon understanding of the extent and purview of the study, each participant was provided, and subsequently signed, an informed consent statement, which was furnished by the interviewer, each of which was retained throughout and beyond completion of the study. Each individual participant was recruited purposefully (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) for this study, as they each identified as a fan of the Kansas City Chiefs and had resided in, or near, the Kansas City metropolitan area for a period of not less than one decade. Interviews were conducted in a conversational, semi-structured fashion, which provides direction without restricting interviewers (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). One interview guide was employed and utilized for each of the 12 interviews for this study, and that guide represents the first appendix of this document.

The questions utilized in the interview processes were subdivided into seven categories. The first category served as a primer, permitting respondents to self-qualify their affinity for the Chiefs. Participants were asked to identify their favorite player for the franchise during the tenure of coach Reid, and elaborate on their rationale for that player being their favorite. Participants were also asked to provide responses regarding how individual players may or may not affect their connection to the team. And also, to qualify their current level of support for the Chiefs, relative to other periods in their time as a Chiefs fan. The next four sets of questions focused solely upon participants' sentiments toward the Chiefs' chronological dealings with individual players. One set of questions was utilized to assess the drafting of Tyreek Hill.

Another set was implemented for the selection of Patrick Mahomes. And two more sets focused upon the trading of Alex Smith, and then the acquisition of Sammy Watkins.

The final two sets of questions were utilized to reflect upon and broaden responses from the previous four. The sixth set called upon respondents to utilize the four players covered to identify where they were confident in the Chiefs' decisions. And also, where they felt as though the Chiefs may have acted poorly; and to identify which decisions, if any, were risky. The final set of questions was deliberately employed to gauge what participants viewed as the franchise's most significant hazards. Additionally, fans were asked how roster moves might jeopardize their affinity. Also, fans were asked to express their preference for how the Chiefs operate with regard to risk. Finally, fans were asked to provide insight as to the criteria and duration from which they would ultimately judge the Chiefs' current management structure.

Analysis

Upon the completion of each interview, the raw data was transcribed from recorded audio formats, into text form with the use of a mobile software application. Each transcription was then scrutinized and coded through the implementation of in vivo coding. In vivo coding, also referred to as verbatim coding, stresses the authentic words of participants, and is especially valuable in engaging with a particular culture (Manning, 2017). Once the first cycle of coding was completed, a second cycle of coding was undertaken through the method of focused coding. Focused coding utilizes the most prominent and recurrent of the initial codes to enable researchers to incisively categorize data (Charmaz, 2006). Focused coding helped to facilitate the discovery of the emergent themes from this study that are presented in the next chapter.

Validity within this study was established through the use of respondent validation, which enabled the investigator to resolve ambiguities and/or potential misinterpretation of the

data by seeking clarification from participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, the point at which the themes and codes became redundant illustrated a point of saturation, a point at which no different, relevant information could be derived (Saunders, et al., 2018). In order to establish reliability with this investigation the author deferred to the verification strategies recommended by Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002). Morse et. al (2002) advise that qualitative researchers employ coherent methods in order to investigate the research question(s), utilize an appropriate sample size, collect and analyze the data concurrently, think theoretically, and also to develop theory as it pertains to the study along with past/future efforts.

Chapter IV: Results

This chapter conveys the emergent themes that developed from the execution of data collection and analysis methods presented in the previous chapter. Those themes are presented here in three categories, and in this order: Positive Fan Sentiment, Negative Fan Sentiment, and Other Findings. Specific themes are presented under the umbrellas of the three overarching categories, and are presented in the order of their individual prominence from analysis. Direct quotes from transcriptions of participants' interviews have been utilized to augment, reinforce, and capture the essence of respondents' sentiments. The purpose of this section is to provide perspective and comprehension of the findings of this study in narrative form.

Positive Fan Sentiment

These themes are interrelated as they reflect sentiments that are supportive of the franchise's actions. And, suggest feelings of enthusiasm and/or confidence as a product of the Chiefs' maneuvers.

appreciable aggressiveness.

The concept of aggressiveness on the part of the Chiefs' talent acquisition also weighed heavily with those interviewed. Brady provided an account of how the drafting of Patrick Mahomes weighed throughout decades of Chiefs' history:

I'm old enough to remember when they took Blackledge in '83. Been around long enough to see the Chiefs have some other really high draft picks. So, I took it to mean that they were being more aggressive. Cause I think they've had a lot of journeymen quarterbacks. We have a parade of San Francisco castoffs, from Bono to Grbac, and even Montana. To move up in the draft, was exciting that they were giving up to get the guy they wanted. Felt optimistic they were not just content with a good record and getting in the playoffs, but hopefully they could make some noise in the playoffs.

Phil qualified the aggressiveness of Mahomes' selection with the following:

That they wanted someone that could air it out, that they wanted to be able to be able to not dink-and-dunk like Alex Smith did. Not be afraid to throw the long ball, you know take chances. Somebody that's not gonna be afraid that if he throws an interception, who cares, you know get back in there, shake it off, and do it again the next time. Any draft pick you're looking for upside, he was gonna make the team better.

The marriage of both the act to trade to move up along with the actual selection of Mahomes given the nature of his play and pedigree suggested that the Chiefs were functioning with more aggression than had been seen in drafts prior.

second chance.

Respondents citing instances in which they and/or the Chiefs were believed to be in favor of granting second chances to players, primarily Tyreek Hill, were profound throughout the interviews. Travis stated that he felt that the timing of the Hill's selection likely benefited Hill:

I think originally domestic violence wasn't as big on the map as it is now. Actually took steps to right some wrongs, so far I think he was worthy of a second shot.

Case believed that timing aided Hill as well:

I think everybody deserves a second chance. At the time, you know, I don't think they could ever do it again. I think his thing was 100 times worse than the Kareem Hunt situation, where it was just drunk people in the hallway. If he were available in the upcoming draft, I don't they could even approach touching him.

Andy Reid's position as the head coach and having a say in talent acquisition, provided Sam with the perception that Reid has a history of working with, and taking chances on those who may have had questionable pasts. Sam's perspective recalled:

Believe he had a domestic assault with a girl, pushed a pregnant girlfriend. Know the move to draft him was questioned by many. Didn't know who he was coming out of college. I feel like Andy Reid in the past has tried to give troublemakers a second chance.

I don't find it hard to root for him.

As Case related Hill's selection to the recently cut Kareem Hunt, Phil did as well. The tone of responses indicated that youth and amateur status during instances of criminal behavior was more deserving of those who had already crossed the threshold into the professional ranks.

Phil offered:

Drafting anybody they're either gonna boom or bust, or do okay, not always a guaranteed thing. But as far as the domestic violence, I don't think it was risky. Everybody deserves a second chance. I think about Ray Rice, and Joe Mixon and Kareem Hunt. Ray Rice's was way worse dude, I mean he punched her and then dragged her out of a elevator. It's not like he just punched her and walked away.

Baker designated youth as benefiting Hill as well in his reflection on the Chiefs move:

I know that he played at OK State, was their number one back, and he was dating a woman at the time that was pregnant. And there was a physical altercation where he punched her, and he got kicked off the team. Transferred to a smaller school. Would like to add that they are now married. He's made amends and paid for his mistakes, honestly think that he truly regrets what happened. It just goes to show that everyone deserves a second chance. Especially whenever you're young, you don't make the best decisions.

Finally, Andrew found the value that the Chiefs received by getting Hill in the third round of the draft to be significant in his recollection of the situation:

I remember hearing about it when he got drafted and went to the third round. If it wasn't for these issues in college he was a solid first round pick. But, everybody bailed on him. You can start see that if a guy turns his life around and gets his head straight; how it can benefit you, if you take a chance on some people. Yeah, it can blow up in your face, but it can benefit you. I think the Chiefs are showing that.

confidence.

Several examples of fans deferring to the expertise of the Chiefs' management were prevalent during discussions. Tommy when asked if there was any point in which he was skeptical of the Mahomes pick stated: "No, there was nothing that came up, basically knew that

when we drafted him, he was gonna sit a year behind Alex, and learn and then take over.” On the selection of Tyreek Hill, Tommy again, posited: “I’m not a scout, they obviously saw something when they spoke to him. He must have said something that struck a chord with them. I got to trust that they made the right decision.” Derek with a significant amount of brevity provided the following in response to whether or not he had been skeptical of the Mahomes selection: “I wasn’t. I saw all the flashes of talent and ability that I needed to see in outings leading up to him being named the starter.”

Sam’s confidence in the Chiefs’ management structure is significant in his take on how the organization measures up against the competition throughout the league. This is evident in Sam’s take on the Chiefs’ decision to pass on Watson in favor of Mahomes:

I feel like every draft this happens. There’s a quarterback class that always gets compared to one another. But when they passed on Watson I was nervous. Management decides we’re going Mahomes, they watch a lot more tape than I do. They got scouts. I trust the leadership up top. Where I feel like, at least half the other teams in the league, their fan bases don’t trust their leadership. To go out and make a move like that shows that we wanna win.

excitement.

The acquisition of players was found to have evoked feelings of excitement and intrigue amongst respondents. Case’s reflection on the current state of the Chiefs relative to other periods during his time as a fan is provided to represent excitement. Case stated:

Definitely spending more money at Arrowhead this year, than I have in years past. If compare it to like the Todd Haley era, I didn’t even bother going to the games. It’s the offense, the excitement, just more fun to be there.

Phil provided that in relation to coach Reid's tenure that his interest in the team has peaked:

"Definitely more involved now than I ever have been, I have always watched and been a fan." In reference to his recollection of the Mahomes selection Brady offered:

I remember being excited that we took a quarterback, did not realize that he was taken before Watson. But Watson was the marquee name in that draft. Would probably tell you that most people didn't know who Mitch Trubisky was until he was drafted. A little surprised because Alex was such a solid, consistent quarterback. Told me that the team was serious about elevating, took it to mean that they were not just content with making the playoffs.

Tommy recalled Mahomes' selection as triggering intrigue in him as a fan as well. Tommy's recounting suggested that the sheer aggression and stakes of the move, emboldened his enthusiasm for the future of the franchise:

Seeing that the Chiefs had jumped up, I knew that they were going to take a QB, didn't know it would necessarily be Mahomes. I was excited that Kansas City finally drafted a QB, it hadn't been done since Todd Blackledge. Their decision was we're gonna pick someone and go with it.

unwavering support.

Many respondents expressed, sometimes adamantly, that regardless of the makeup of the roster that they have and will continue to support the franchise. Again providing an appreciated level of brevity, Derek, in describing his current level of support for the Chiefs stated, "I'm all in. It's never changed". Tommy's response to the same question netted a similar response, "It hasn't peaked more. Just because they're doing good now, doesn't mean I am a bigger fan. I like them at their lows and highs." In trying to evoke and draw out how individual players may affect

Chiefs fans' identification, many responded that players had little or no effect on their identification. Phil, on the subject:

I don't know that they do, I mean I've always liked the Chiefs. I didn't care who was on the team. Of course, I'd bitch about guys I didn't like or whatever, or praise guys that were good. But, I'm not gonna, not be a fan because they cut somebody, or be more of a fan because they added a guy. I mean, when they signed Sammy Watkins, I mean he's good, but he's always been injured, he's never played a whole season. It's almost like why? But it's not gonna make me say, aww forget the Chiefs, I'm not gonna, not cheer for them anymore, I'm not gonna not be a fan.

To the same question in reference to players' character, Derek replied, "They make me feel a little uneasy. Prefer them not to be pieces of crap off the field, but that doesn't sway my fandom." Baker showed his unwavering support, but conceded that it is easier to be a fan with better players: "Still a fan regardless of the product that's on the field. We've had losing years, until Reid got here. I'm a die-hard fan whether they win or lose. However, whenever they winning I'll go to more games." For these fans, this suggests that identification with the Kansas City franchise is less contingent upon the talent, and more so with other factors.

seriousness.

Certain actions of the Chiefs signaled to fans that they had suddenly become serious about attempting to compete for championships. In narrating their reactions towards the selection of Mahomes, respondents frequently suggested, that the Chiefs' action signified that the franchise had now become serious about winning, and surpassing mediocrity. Ben's response illustrates this theme well:

That they're listening to fans, finally. I think they're trying to prove to the fans, and the league that it's not about just filling the seats. That they want to win a Super Bowl I think that's a big statement right there. I think it proved that they want to go for it, that they want to be champions. I think the franchise very easily could've stayed where they were at like they have for so many years.

Bryant's response was similar in nature, "That we wasn't playing around, simple as that. We actually traded and decided to go for our quarterback. Nobody else's quarterback, thank god. They were taking it serious." Brady added a benchmark or qualifier to the sentiment echoed by many. Brady added that the move indicated to him, "told me that the team was serious about elevating. Took it to mean that they were not just content with making the playoffs."

go for it, take chances.

The final question in each interview that dealt most directly with how fans preferred the franchise operated with regard to risk. Respondents were asked how they prefer the club build their roster with regard to risk, clarity was provided on the question. To clarify and provide some perspective or a lens to participants, they were to assume that taking on more risk provides a greater opportunity at winning more, or all 16 regular season games. But also that with more risk the likelihood that the club would lose more, or all 16 regular season games also increased. No participant indicated a preference for conservatism. And nearly all proclaimed an acceptance of losing being preferable to mediocrity. Ben presented his thoughts as such:

I'd rather have the risk. Because I think we've already seen what playing it cautious is, and that's mediocrity. As a Chiefs fan I'd much rather see them take a risk, and go for it all, even if it costs us 16 games. Because then it tells me hey they want to win. We've had

a lot of mediocrity for very long time, playing it safe. Playing it safe gets you nowhere; no risk, no reward. I would rather play to win. Than, play it safe, not to lose.

Brady's take provided a greater philosophical understanding as viewed through the lens of game theory, and through the eye of the sport consumer. Brady theorized:

The risks have to be calculated. Not saying go for it on 4th and 1 every time they face one. Those risks have to be weighed with the personnel, talent, skillsets they have on the team. At the end of the day it's a sport. Sports inherently involve risk. Not just sports, even games. You have to take risks to give yourself the opportunity to come out on top. Even with golf, I love watching Phil cause he takes risks. It's not fun watching conservative play.

Case expounded on the concept from the position of the sport consumer, adding that football is significantly unique to other professional team sports, due to the relatively short nature of football players' careers. Case's perspective:

I always assume that they take risk. I think they avoided it for the longest time. You know signing Alex Smith, and a host of mediocre washed up quarterbacks, just to avoid burning draft picks. Aggressiveness is preferable to conservatism. Football is a must now sport, where as baseball, you watch the Royals build a World Series winner over six or eight years. And, you can't do that in football cause none of those guys will be around. It's basically now or never.

Finally, Sam provided a concise response that may well encapsulate a majority of the themes presented here. Sam's reaction comes of as an appeal, or plea to the managers of the franchise:

I want talent. I want the best of the best that's available. If they got problems that happened in their past, come in and tell me that you're done with that crap, you don't

wanna do that s***, you're done pushing girls, you're done kicking girls in hallways, you're not gonna do that. You're gonna keep your nose clean, be good talent, man we need talent. I want them to be aggressive, but dovetailing of your Sammy Watkins question earlier, I think that was too aggressive. I want you to be aggressive, but I want you to be smart. Take your risks, but take smart risks. Don't get too risky, and certainly don't be overpaying people. If they don't wanna play here, then there's something wrong with them I feel like. I know it's all about the money. But, you control what those guys make, just take smart risks.

Negative Fan Sentiment

These themes are indicative occurrences in which respondents felt as though the Chiefs may have performed in a manner that was of detriment to the chances for on-field success of the team. Findings contained here also reflect sentiments in which participants believed that circumstances may have disadvantaged the Chiefs, or that franchise may have operated in a fashion that welcomed self-inflicted shortcomings.

negligence.

Inarguably, respondents conveyed sentiments that reflected that those responsible for the construction of the Chiefs' roster and coaching staff had operated in manners that were negligent and/or left the team overly susceptible to the opposition. Sam highlights this point when asked about the greatest hazards to the Chiefs franchise:

When you're lighting the scoreboard up, 38 points, if you score 38 you should win, you give up 30 you should lose. On the field I'd say the defense. Off the field, well, we just had a guy get released. I don't see this team having those kinds of issues. We got a couple hot dogs, Kelce's a hot dog, Tyreek is a hot dog. 15-yard penalties, he had one the other

day. This team, they got no D, that's the only thing holding them back. If you got Peters over there on one side, and Fuller on the other side. That would've been something special. The Chiefs I feel like have always historically had good defenses, hopefully it's not a changing of the guard here. Never had an explosive offense. Defense is a liability, first time I think we can say that as Chiefs fans. Usually it's the other way around, I watched the Steelers come to Arrowhead a couple years ago, not score a f*****g touchdown and beat us. We scored two, and they beat us. Never been more sad in my entire life.

Sam's thoughts were frequently echoed throughout other interviews, as many respondents felt as the organization had operated negligently in over pursuing offensive talent, while the necessity to reconstruct the defense had been evident for years. Similarly, Bryant cited what he felt was a hasty and rash decision on the part of the Chiefs to trade cornerback Marcus Peters because of his personal conduct: "Patriots, smile and lick their lips, when teams cut talent, because of image. Peters lacked humility, accept and take chances. Accept the fire and the passion, if it's not getting flags or affecting day-day life."

Resoundingly, the acquisition of Sammy Watkins was a glaring point for participants in which they felt that the Chiefs had operated poorly. Case offered the following to highlight the potential jeopardy coinciding with Watkins' addition: "It's put them in a cap situation. At least for the next two years they're going to need a ton of money to try to get out from underneath that." Andrew stated: "Sammy, has a chance to be problem for a couple years, extreme injury history." Brady's response to the Chiefs' onboarding of Watkins, was perhaps the most comprehensive:

Disagreed with the whole deal. Liked the idea of having Sammy Watkins or somebody of his caliber on the team. I don't think he's worth the money. Considering how lopsided the talent is on the defensive side of the ball. Considering the talent that we already had. Conley was a very good up and coming receiver. I agreed that having a number one prototypical receiver opposite Tyreek was good. I didn't think we needed to pay Watkins money to get there though.

The notion that Watkins' being picked up compromised the team was not unanimously upheld across participants however. Bryant offered that the move benefited the team and that Watkins simply had not had the opportunity to perform to his potential with this: "I loved it. Sammy Watkins is a freak, his production doesn't show it. He's not just a decoy. His first two years in Buffalo, they never had a quarterback."

When asked about which, if any, of the decisions by the Chiefs involving Hill, Mahomes, Smith, and Watkins were risky, Allen offered the following: "Mahomes was the most risky. Cause if he sucked and we got rid of Smith, then they probably would've got fired, Andy Reid. Getting rid of Alex Smith, and going to Mahomes, putting all our eggs in one basket". Dispensing a veteran, established commodity in Smith for an unproven talent stands out as potentially precarious.

lopsided transactions.

Respondents citing instances in which the Chiefs' organization had come out on the losing side of a transaction was the next most apparent theme. When asked to describe his reactions to the Chiefs trading Alex Smith, Bryant, posed:

Bittersweet, wasn't 100 sure if Patrick Mahomes was as smart as everyone was saying. If he was a winner like Alex. Pissed me off that we only got a third rounder for Marcus

Peters. The whole offseason was just a rollercoaster for me, didn't know where the organization was heading. Let a ball hawk like Marcus Peters go away for nothing, the reasons behind it. There were moments where I was like, huh, we're a f*****' joke.

While Bryant's response doesn't necessarily nail down his thoughts on Smith trade specifically, it does encapsulate how participants often viewed the Chiefs' dealings as concessions. Allen, on Alex Smith's trade was more concise:

Alex Smith, I thought what we got for him wasn't equivalent. I thought we should be getting something better for that. He's like a top quarterback, was gonna get the Redskins to the playoffs this year, and now look at them. That's his impact on that team, he's the difference maker, he got hurt, and now they're not even a contender.

On the subject of acquiring Sammy Watkins, Andrew voiced his displeasure with the Chiefs inability function with savvy:

I didn't like it. He was notorious for not putting hundred percent into it. I mean when it was such a big deal when he came to training camp with his haircut, and everybody's like 'oh he's taking it serious now'. That makes me worry. I think they wanted to go out make a splash at wide receiver and that was what they could get for the money they were willing to spend. Makes me wish that they would've gone after different receivers. I wasn't sold on him, a rocky track record.

Case's depiction of the Watkins acquisition, builds upon Andrew's and shows how the Chiefs may have overlooked history in the move:

Always thought it was a bad decision, because of his history with foot injuries. There has to be a reason why the Rams just walked away and signed Cooks. They basically signed the same receiver, for the same money, they could've given Sammy Watkins; he already

knew the offense. And then Buffalo let him walk away, he was their franchise. So two other franchises can't be wrong.

undesirable player stigmas.

Patrick Mahomes' selection in the 2017 draft, along with the Chiefs' opting to pass on Deshaun Watson in favor of Mahomes, brought about a number of instances in which both quarterbacks had been stigmatized in the mind of participants. Mahomes' playing for Texas Tech to many hindered his worthiness, while Watson's well-developed rushing capabilities carried their own stigmas. As Ben's response to the Chiefs' passing on Watson in favor of Mahomes shows here:

Had they selected Deshaun, they probably would've been maybe a little more inclined to start him right away. Just because I think peer pressure from fans and maybe upper would've probably went with him. Experience and all the hype you know with Deshaun when he is coming out. Patrick was a little more under the radar to the fans, I think, him being from Texas Tech and everyone's misconception of that style offense. Or, that type of quarterback coming into the NFL, Deshaun didn't have all that going against him.

Case echoed the sentiment that Watson was seemingly more prepared to perform at the professional level in his response, how he believed the Chiefs performed in their selection of Mahomes:

I mean it was a bad decision. Obviously now, in hindsight, it's not. But, at the time I think his pedigree was a lot stronger. Really didn't think they'd have the chance, really never thought Mahomes was an option. I don't even know how they justified it, I mean it seemed like a bad choice. A lot of experts were skeptical of Mahomes, you know burning picks to move up and get him.

While Watson may have been the apparent miss on the part of the Chiefs, others viewed the decision less from an ability standpoint, and more so from through the lens of longevity.

Watson's style of play carried with it a perceived increased threat of injury due to his propensity to run with the ball, as Andrew's take on the matter emphasizes:

I think he was the Midwest boy, he was perfect fit for Kansas City. Go back to the leg quarterbacks with Michael Vick, eventually they get beat up so they have to rely on their arm. I guess I'd be okay with getting him, but I would rather have Mahomes I think he has higher upside, and I think he's gonna last longer.

blatantly welcoming risk.

Occurrences where fans had found the Chiefs to have overtly been welcoming risk are presented here. Tommy, rather adamantly, found the Chiefs drafting of Tyreek Hill to be risky in light of his transgressions in college:

Obviously Tyreek was the most risky. Because of the domestic assault, if he would have had another charge that would have looked poorly on the Chiefs for picking someone that already had that against them. With what had taken place in the league before with Ray Rice, it's a risk drafting anybody.

Brady's perspective was in lockstep with Tommy's, citing that the spotlight on domestic violence occurrences within the league and charges against players: "The climate of the NFL, think the riskiest, was probably Tyreek, with off the field troubles." Sam, frequently likened his perspectives of the Chiefs to the New England Patriots throughout his interview, and did so again with his take on the Chiefs' selection of Hill. Here he recounts perhaps the most notably risky pick in NFL history:

The Tyreek pick got the fans chirping, especially in the Midwest here. That's a risky play in the media after Ray Rice. Thin ice man, you don't wanna be the team that's drafting Aaron Hernandez. Took some guts, and might not have been perceived well by the fans. The Patriots drafting of Hernandez who had behavioral issues coming out of college, serves as an example where the welcoming of risk in pursuit of significant on the field talent ultimately backfired when the tight end was ultimately convicted of first-degree murder in 2015 (Belson & Mather, 2015).

Other respondents found that the selection of Mahomes was blatantly risky. Baker's take on the move mentions the price paid by the Chiefs and the potential of missing out on Watson as obviously taking on risk:

For them to move up ten spots and lose another number one pick, man that was that was risky, basically on an unknown. I was wrong probably like lots of other people too, thought Deshaun was the man coming out of the draft.

Case viewed the Chiefs taking Mahomes similarly to Baker, "Probably a risk at the time, it could've turned really good or really bad. Could've been the biggest bust, cause I don't think anyone thought he was a top ten talent."

costliness.

Respondents often viewed the actions of the Chiefs as being expensive. When questioned about the risks attributed to the Mahomes selection several participants identified the draft picks spent were of great substantial worth. Sam, again, measuring the Chiefs' actions to the Patriots suggested:

We gave up a lot I felt like, and it was an aggressive move. Anytime you move up, 10-11 spots, man that's aggressive. Anytime you start giving away draft picks that ain't good.

Look at Belichick, man, he stacks them. That's potentially, you're handcuffing yourself. But sometimes it pays off, sometimes it works. And this might be an instance where do you want to better their moves in the draft and the history of the NFL.

Case, Allen, and Derek all cited the move as costly for the potential of having missed out on another or even better prospect. Brady proposes: "the terms of the deal, picks, missing on those following next year. Our defense is struggling, some picks to bolster the defense, should you have taken a stud D Back, or anyone on the other side of the ball?"

location drawbacks.

Several interviews brought out points wherein fans believed as though the franchise's contending in Kansas City may negatively impact the team's ability to recruit talented players. Initially the concept that Kansas City might be disadvantaged in recruiting came about organically, and was not initially considered in design of the study. This was most evident when inquiring about the Chiefs' addition of Sammy Watkins. Once the theme began to emerge, the remaining participants were asked, where possible to provide additional insight on the notion. Ben was the first to mention the subject, when asked how roster moves may potentially jeopardize his support for the Chiefs:

Maybe a little bitter, never less willing to support. You know I don't always agree with everything they do move wise. You always lose players you don't want to lose, and then you pick up people that you're not real high on... ..one of the biggest problems the Chiefs have always had is getting talent to come into KC, because it's never been that big of a market team. You know you don't get as much media unless you're really good, or you have Patrick Mahomes. Salary cap wise seems like we're always on the barely making it side, seems like we have to cut talented players because of it, and sign lesser

players because of it. Every team faces these, just seems like we're always out of cap space. That pisses me off more than anything. That comes to being proactive with resignings, instead of reactive. If you're a desirable place to play, players are gonna take a little less to play there. If you're winning team, or you have a chance, players going take a little less to be on that team. Then they are if they know for say they were going to the Cleveland Browns.

Travis added to in reference to the Watkins move that the Chiefs: "Paid a lot for him, knowing he's an injury risk. Probably could have had a more performance-based contract. Knew they needed to pay more to get him to come to KC."

Also on the concept being unable to compete for free agents, Andrew's perspective adds that in Watkins deal:

I think he had a good agent that leveraged that there wasn't a lot of talent. You also have top receivers are not gonna want to go play for an unproven quarterback. So when you have ones that want to go out and there and they want yards, they necessarily aren't gonna want to go play for an unproven quarterback. So that may have been one where the agent leveraged that against the Chiefs. 'Hey if you want someone who's considered one of the upper level receivers, you're gonna have to overpay for him'.

Andrew also called Kansas City's weather into question, "We're at the mercy of the weather".

Later, Allen added that the weather provides other cities/franchises advantages in their recruitment of talent and in the case of signing Watkins:

I bet they had to do that just to get him to come to Kansas City. It's in the Midwest, maybe location. Maybe that's all we could get. Maybe just to get someone to come here,

maybe we had to pay a little bit more than other teams. It's not LA, or Miami those are just big time cities; you know it's usually warm.

forced hand.

Instances in which the Chiefs were viewed to have been in a predicament in which they were left with few, or no alternatives were frequently discussed. When asked to recount their thoughts to the franchise trading Alex Smith, five of the respondents felt as though the Chiefs' hand was forced in the scenario. Sam felt as though the value still attached to Alex Smith factored significantly:

Needed to be done. Was standing in the way of Pat. Had a year left, sports 101, get some value out of him. No problem with the move. Improved the secondary with Fuller, think we fleeced the Redskins. He was blocking Mahomes, trade him while you got some value.

The money that Smith was due to make with the Chiefs had he been retained, coupled with the team's performance under Smith in the team's meltdown at Arrowhead in the 2018 playoffs, indicated to Case that the Chiefs had no choice but to move on from Smith:

I think it had to happen, think it was a forced issue, they owed him a lot of money and couldn't sit Mahomes after trading up to get him. So you know you gotta move on. After the playoff loss, hard to bring him back after that.

Andrew again offered a great deal of perspective, in suggesting that the Chiefs merely starting Mahomes in the 2017 regular season finale, a contest that was of no consequence to the team served to force the Chiefs' hand in handling Smith. Andrew on the topic:

Surprised, not that they traded him, but what they got for him. Everybody knew that the Chiefs had to unload him. They kind of put themselves in a corner when Mahomes

played so well against Denver. Shocked at what they were able to get for him knowing that every other team in the league knew they had to unload him.

apprehension, reluctance.

Fans often cited examples in which they were hesitant to believe in the organization for various reasons, most of which were rooted in previous actions of the Chiefs franchise. The cliché of ‘waiting for the other shoe to drop, ran commonly throughout interaction with participants, implying that the franchise will seemingly always find a way to botch favorable circumstances. Derek on his thoughts at the selection of Mahomes:

I was pumped. I had never seen my team select a quarterback in the first round. I was a bit skeptical at first and still am to some degree. As a Chiefs fan, you always wait for the other shoe to drop.

In describing the trajectory of the franchise since Reid became coach, Andrew professed reluctance in having faith in the team, coach, and style of play:

They shifted more seems like more for my running to a passing style. I'm not a huge fan, I like the run game, I've always liked the run game. But at the end of the day the playoffs are still the same result we're still losing to the Colts and Patriots.

Baker expressed having felt apprehensive at times when the Chiefs were struggling at points throughout their 2017 campaign. He recalled having thought that the coaching staff had seen vulnerabilities in Mahomes through practice, and was concerned that they were not putting him in place of Smith, because he was not proving capable. Baker on apprehension, “I was a little skeptical that Reid didn't put him in, even when ever Smith struggled last year. Thought that maybe Reid saw something that he didn't like you know.”

Other Findings

The themes presented in this category did not express either support for the Chiefs' decisions, or bear sentiments with negative affect. But, because of the frequency with which they were encountered throughout the study, they are offered in order to provide further insight.

community.

How the community responds to, and embraces players was the second most prevalent theme. Having players that are engaged with and interact with Kansas City weighed heavily with respondents, when considering how they viewed the Chiefs organization. Andrew, in reference to Patrick Mahomes' selection posited that:

This year's different, you feel like there's anything is possible with the kid they drafted. He's a small town kid, he's connected. You see him out and about, at KU games, in the community. That's part of why everyone loved the Royals, the players were out in the community, in a small city like this, that's huge.

Similarly, Brady stated:

They are certainly a lot of fun to watch this year. My interest in the Chiefs this year is probably as high as when I was a season ticket holder, but when I go back to those years. Call me a fair weather fan, when there's a better product on the field, I enjoy watching the games more. They're a lot more meaningful, I'm more hopeful for the city and for the team.

Multiple participants highlighted how their support and interest in individual players was rooted in how involved players are within the community. Sam's support for the Chiefs is bolstered by the team's sincerity:

Can't see local media without seeing one thing of those guys out there in the community. Where previous Chiefs teams I feel like we're lacking, feel like it was forced. The way this team interacts with the community is genuine, not forced.

Throughout the first four interviews with participants during data collection, it became clear that the community-franchise/player relationship was going to weigh heavily within the results.

Seemingly, no matter the stage or subject being addressed in each interview, respondents would frequently revert back to the community and social significance of the team.

In reference to the selection of Tyreek Hill, Ben felt as though Hill has made strides in repairing his image and making amends for his criminal past: "I think he's earned his right to be on this team, and has shown he wants to be a part of the community and seems to have learned from his mistakes". Also, on the subject of Hill's selection, Bryant added: "I was confident that they had confidence in him. Kansas City tends to judge a lot, before we actually know the individual", suggesting that the city as a whole may at times be close-minded to individuals, or prejudiced.

reasonable expectations.

The final point of inquiry attempted to evoke how participants would ultimately judge the Chiefs' current management/coaching structure. Only two participants, Derek and Sam professed that a Super Bowl win in the near future was a necessity to qualify the franchise's leaders as successful. With Derek stating blatantly, "that's what the game is about." Sam took that notion further and a little more colorfully:

I love it. We got one of the best scenarios right now in the league. Teams are interviewing our guys. The fact that other teams want our guys, that's one of them good problems. If everyone is still around in 2024, as a Chiefs fan that's never seen one, just give me one man that's all I want. Yes, it's a failure if we don't have one. Mahomes and

Reid, you have to get at least one. Maybe the answer is three... One before I die man, I don't give a f***, just give me one!

Derek and Sam removed, most felt as though expecting Super Bowl titles was too lofty. Case added to the idea that the Chiefs are well-positioned:

AFC championship game it's gotta be, just with the group of players they've assembled.

The next two or three years, most of them are under contract. I think they should make one super bowl, not necessarily win it.

While Allen expressed that he would be content with just a progression and an ability to actually have some success in the playoffs, "need at least two playoff wins the same season. If you're not succeeding in the postseason, then what's the point of all that. That's happened so many times. People can only take so much." Allen's response indicates that recurrent disappointment wears upon his ability to endure mediocrity.

Chapter V: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to contribute to sport management professionals a source for understanding how one franchise's potentially risky player transactions were perceived by its fans, and how those transactions might have affected identification with the franchise. This section provides the author's examination of the resulting themes of the study, while exploring the themes' relationship to the research question and existing relevant literature. This section also contains and concludes with portions regarding practical implications, limitations of the study, and considerations for future research.

Execution of this study was intended to reveal how sport fans viewed their team's roster moves with regard to potential risks that may have coincided with those player transactions. Utilizing the four moves by the Chiefs' organization along with other information participants

felt relevant, 17 themes emerged from the processes of data collection and the analysis of that data. Inarguably, the most prevalent theme that arose from the study was that of the Chiefs having had functioned in a negligent manner that fans felt compromised the team, and left them vulnerable to opposition. Multiple participants offered the example wherein the Chiefs traded cornerback Marcus Peters to the Rams in the 2018 offseason, as evidence for having compromised the team on the defensive side of the ball. Which only served to further impact the conceptualization of the theme in that many respondents stated multiple times that the franchise's emphasis on, and favor towards offensive talent acquisition had already left the team compromised. This was most greatly demonstrated in response to the signing of Sammy Watkins, which many felt, was unnecessary, or that the team overpaid him. And, in overpaying Watkins the franchise diminished the available salary cap space that could have been better distributed to the both sides of the ball. However, for fans if title contention is the ultimate goal, consideration should be given to the findings of McGee, Scyoc, and Burnett (2015). McGee et al. (2015) found after studying NFL seasons 2000-2009, that overspending on one side of the ball to the other was actually beneficial, because teams that had reached the Super Bowl in those seasons overtly spend more heavily on either offense or defense.

Following negligence, and nearly overtaking it, was the theme of community. Participants frequently identified throughout the data collection process a great deal of significance on how the interaction of players with the community affected their connection with players and the franchise. For the purposes of this study this was most substantial in how fans viewed Tyreek Hill's rehabilitation and assimilation into the Kansas City community after carrying the burden of his criminal past into his professional career. Participants identified the receiver's remorseful nature and his integration into the community while becoming a role

model. Similarly, in identifying their favorite players fans pointed Eric Berry as a role model, and Alex Smith for his charitable contributions in his time in Kansas City. This reinforces the notion that those identified with a team greatly favor those players whose personalities and behaviors are positive in nature (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009). And in turn, reinforces the pride that identified fans outwardly express in their team (Wann & Dolan, 1994).

The theme that the Chiefs' managers had lost in lopsided transactions was also evident throughout participant interviews. Fans expressed displeasure in the amount of money that Sammy Watkins had been paid by the Chiefs. Fans pointed not only to the money that Watkins received, but also his injury and performance history. One participant's account called into question how the Chiefs could so confidently pay Watkins such a sizeable salary after having seen two franchises in the two previous years both cast him out. The Chiefs' poor dealings reinforce the significance of the necessity of having capable and competent managers to handle talent assessments and acquisitions (Motomura, Roberts, Leeds, & Leeds, 2016).

Appreciable aggressiveness was brought about through discussions regarding the Chiefs' trading up to select Mahomes, fans cited the experience as new and intriguing. The move was believed by most to have been a win off of the field, and winning is of great significance to identified fans (Jang, Wann, & Ko, 2018). The theme of the second chance was pronounced and recurrent in discussion of Tyreek Hill. Somewhat perplexing is the resounding support that the responses indicated for the Chiefs providing Hill with a second chance. Meanwhile the participant responses suggested for the most part that fans were adamantly opposed to the onboarding of a player with an injury history in Watkins. The value that Hill's selection in a later round, while believed by many to have had the talent of a first round selection might suggest that not only did the second chance offer fans a boost from morality, but the fact that the Chiefs

initially got him at a discount emboldened fan support for the Chiefs' decision. The overall value of second and third round picks has been found to outweigh the value carried by first round selections (Kraeutler, Carver, Belk, & McCarty, 2018).

Confidence as a theme was found in acceptance of the Chiefs executive's decisions, and to support their decisions by rooting for the players that they bring in. NFL executives have been found to be accurate in their ranking prospects against one another (Boulier, Stekler, Coburn, & Rankins, 2010). Fans expressed a trust in the Chiefs moves primarily in the selections of Mahomes and Hill. The theme of excitement was expressed in generally in respondents recounting their reactions to the selection of Patrick Mahomes. This excitement coincides with the enthusiasm that Hunt, Bristol, and Bashaw (1999) offer in their description of sport fans. Additionally, Wann, Tucker, and Schrader (1996) found that the presence of certain players on a team facilitated and strengthened team identification.

Costliness surfaced as a theme in the price the Chiefs paid with the draft picks they conceded in order to move up in the draft and select Mahomes. And, again in the amount of money paid to Watkins along with the reciprocal effect his contract had on the salary cap. Examination has shown that, "buying expensive players, even if they turn out to be great performers, imposes opportunity costs elsewhere on the roster" (Massey & Thaler, 2005). Many participants in their indicating that regardless of the choices the team made with the selection of players, they would continue to support and cheer for the Chiefs championed unwavering support as a theme. Highly identified fans have been found to maintain their allegiances through less cheerful periods (Wann & Dolan, 1994). The theme that the Chiefs had repeatedly had their hand forced in their transactions was prevalent in conversations regarding primarily Sammy Watkins, but also the trading of Alex Smith. Fans expressed that the Chiefs were forced to

overpay for Watkins due to a depleted free agent market and a need to surround Mahomes with as many powerful offensive weapons as possible. This suggests that salary cap considerations and restrictions (Massey & Thaler, 2005) served to inhibit the Chiefs' abilities to operate at an optimal capacity in acquiring support to better allow Mahomes to succeed.

The theme of apprehension and reluctance was rooted mostly in participant recollections of previous seasons and regimes within the Chiefs' organization. The reluctance for some even affected periods of excitement towards the drafting of Mahomes. That enthusiasm was mitigated by the Chiefs' history and lack of success. The idea that the Chiefs' fortunes with Mahomes may come to be compromised illuminates Hersch and Pelkowski (2016), which found that teams that traded up for players received greater contributions from those players. The theme of seriousness was noticed in respondents recalling what they felt that the Chiefs picking Mahomes suggested for the future of the franchise. Fans took the move to mean or signify that the franchise had become more serious in their ambition to win contests. Fittingly, Caporale and Collier (2015) found an improvement in draft position did offer greater realized success on the field the in the following season.

Go for it, take chances, as a theme stemmed from fans being asked to express their preferences for the Chiefs' operating with regard to risk when they assemble their rosters and shop for talent. While not the most prominent theme derived from the study, it was likely the most unanimously echoed. Again, Caporale and Collier (2015), along with Hersch and Pelkowski (2016) found incentive in teams taking chances to move up in draft position, which registers here. Respondents were found to be in favor of the team taking chances even if that could potentially be inviting of the opportunity to have losing seasons, which many felt was

preferable to mediocrity, or finishing in the middle of the pack. Fans expressed a preference for going for it, because it signifies an effort on the part of the team to attempt to be successful.

Practical Implications

Transferring and applying the findings of this study into team public relations campaigns stands out as the most obvious use. The study shows in a myriad of ways how fans view the decisions of sport managers, when they engage in potentially risky roster maneuvers. Franchises and their executives retain the power and authority to engage in transactions with players. However care, must be taken in realizing that these moves have ramifications in how they may or may not affect fan identification with the team. This study reflects most importantly that fans are supportive of and embrace the concept of their team taking on risk in building their roster. So much so, that the prospects of losing more than winning as a result of having a franchise take on risk is resoundingly preferable to having a mediocre team.

Limitations

This investigation was limited by a number of factors. First, and most significantly was that the data collection occurred well after each of the transactions with the Chiefs' players had already taken place. The data collection was also performed either on the day that the Chiefs clinched home field advantage in the 2019 postseason or within a week there after, it is possible that sentiment toward the franchise would have been positively skewed. Also, the study utilized only a dozen participants in one city, which were fans of only one franchise.

Considerations for Future Research

Future projects should likely broaden in location, scale, and be conducted at more opportune times. A larger study might include some franchises that are successful, some that are underperforming, and others that are mediocre over a longer span. Ideally this would be done in

a manner that enabled investigators to receive fan responses within only hours or days of roster transactions transpiring. Utilizing larger pools of fans will offer more perspective, and perhaps serve to reinforce or add to the themes and results of this study. Additionally, the idea concept of the Chiefs having to pay more to bring in talent was a point of intrigue with the investigator. An in-depth look into possible causes for discounts afforded to, or premiums paid by smaller/larger, warmer/colder, and successful/unsuccessful franchises seems like an interesting, worthwhile venture.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Baseline Questions

- 1A. Describe your attachment to the Kansas City Chiefs franchise.
- 1B. Describe the trajectory of Chiefs since Andy Reid became head coach.
- 1C. Name your favorite Chiefs player during coach Reid's tenure, and why do you regard him so?
- 1D. How do individual players affect your connection to the franchise?
- 1E. Describe your current level of support and interest in the Chiefs. How does it relate to other periods in your time as a fan?

Tyreek Hill

- 2A. What do you know of Tyreek Hill's background prior to his selection in the draft by the Chiefs?
- 2B. Describe your thoughts and reactions toward the Chiefs' selection of Tyreek Hill.

Patrick Mahomes

- 3A. Recall and describe your thoughts to the selection of Patrick Mahomes in the 2017 draft.
- 3B. What, do you believe, did the Mahomes selection suggest for the future of the Chiefs?
- 3C. For what reasons, if any, were you skeptical of Mahomes' selection prior to his being named the starter in 2018?
- 3D. In the same circumstances, the Chiefs could have selected Deshaun Watson, have you at considered this at any point? How do you qualify the Chiefs' decision to pass on Watson in favor of Mahomes?
- 3E. What risks do you attribute to the Chiefs' selection of Mahomes?

Alex Smith

- 4A. What do you know of Alex Smith's career and accolades prior to being traded to the Chiefs?
- 4B. Describe in detail, as best you can, Alex Smith's performance with the Chiefs.
- 4C. Describe your reactions to the Chiefs' trading of Alex Smith.

Sammy Watkins

5A. Describe your reactions to the Chiefs' acquisition of Sammy Watkins.

5B. In signing Sammy Watkins the Chiefs paid him at a level relative to elite receivers throughout the league. How do you view this decision by the Chiefs?

Merging

6A. Which, if any, and for what reason(s), of the four players discussed, do you feel most confident in the Chiefs' decision-making? How so?

6B. Which, if any, of these four instances and decisions regarding players do you feel the Chiefs acted poorly? And, how so?

6C. Of the players discussed, which, if any, of the Chiefs' decisions were risky and/or jeopardized the team? In what ways?

Perspective

7A. Describe the greatest hazards to the Chiefs from your perspective.

7B. In what manner(s), if any, do risky maneuvers in roster composition jeopardize your interest in and/or support for the Chiefs?

7C. If accepting risk in roster composition allows for the widest range of outcomes relating to wins and losses, describe your preferences/desires for the Chiefs' approach.

7D. How will you ultimately judge the Chiefs' current management structure? What will your reasoning be?