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Building the Nashville Predators Brand

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BUILDING THE
NASHVILLE
PREDATORS
BRAND



Jonathan Generotti

Building the Nashville Predators Brand

Jonathan Ross Generotti

“When I came to Nashville, my most important objective was to make this Nashville’s team in every way.”

– Craig Leipold, Original Owner

Nearly twenty years ago the National Hockey League granted the small southern market of Nashville the opportunity to host a team. And nearly twenty years later, the franchise has thrived into a hallmark of the city firmly planted in the NHL. The venture to instill this northern sport into a small market, almost entirely ignorant to the gameplay and rules, was an undertaking that was scoffed at by some. Entering a new market is always a significant risk, but it can come with substantial opportunity for success. In the case of the Nashville Predators, continuously crafting their unique brand within the mind of the city and league mitigated the risk and turned the franchise into an entertainment stalwart at the heart of a flourishing city.

Background

The plight for professional sports in Nashville was a succinct but tumultuous one starting in 1995 and ending in 1997 with the grant of the NHL expansion. Construction of the then named “Nashville Arena” was underway in ’95 at the commission of mayor Phil Bredeson with the objective to expand Nashville from a niche southern market to a more a national one (Farber). And, plans were rapidly being made for a team to host it. First on the list was a relocation of the NHL team, the New Jersey Devils, fresh off a Stanley Cup Championship win and now staring down the threat of moving 750 miles south to Nashville over their owner’s arena dispute. Despite a \$20 million relocation bonus on the table, New Jersey restructured and Nashville returned to the franchise hunt with hope as the NHL commissioner noted “they might be a city we look to in the future” (“Nashville Still Seeks Team”). Faced with a finished arena and no talk of the chance to start a fresh franchise in the city, Nashville pursued relocation again as it surfaced that the NBA’s Sacramento Kings were on the fringe of upheaval from California;

however, this endeavor too turned out unrewarding (Farber). These two deals falling through provided the perfect avenue for Nashville to create their own brand from the ground up when it was announced that the NHL expansion was happening and that Nashville was a finalist.



The efforts of early team owner, Craig Leipold paid off as he conditionally secured the team’s expansion franchise in 1997 through his LLC (Willis, Bratten, Ramirez, Grimson, Weber, Daunic). After what seemed like another cumbersome ordeal, there was now the extraordinarily demanding task of positioning this team and game to an unaware audience. And, expansion in this market would prove to have unique challenges to overcome.

Overall, four cities were given expansions: Nashville, Columbus, Minnesota, and Atlanta. Nashville and Columbus were the only two which did not previously have a franchise and also had the lowest television market sizes of the four teams that would enter the league by the turn of the millennium (Associated Press). Nashville’s southern roots planted in football and NASCAR coupled with a lower television market size that was not yet on the national stage due to the lack of a professional sports team marked significant challenges for the organization to overcome. On top of all these challenges, Nashville also had to fight for sales against the Tennessee Oilers, soon to be Titans, who were moving to Nashville during their inaugural year.

Education and marketing to the community would be essential, but the conditional franchise hinged on owner Craig Leipold being able to sell 12,000 season tickets for an arena that held just over 17,000 in nine months without the selling points of a name, logo, or players at first (Farber). Naturally, the first two selling points were remedied within four months but the nature of the expansion draft meant that star hockey players would not be coming to Nashville and the organization would not have an athlete’s face to garner these ticket sales.

An expansion draft takes place to fill the roster of new NHL teams. Expansion teams draft players from the established NHL teams with stipulations and Nashville was the first team of this new expansion era to draft. In this draft, current organizations can choose to protect either nine forwards, five defensemen, and one goalie or seven forwards, three defensemen, and two goalies out of their twenty-three man rosters. Additionally, players on entry level contracts cannot be drafted meaning that promising rookie and young players are exempt (Schoeninger). Thus, the types of players left for the Predators to choose from are all of those deemed unessential to the rest of the teams in the league. As a result, expansion teams typically have losing seasons to begin the franchise. Without a star quality player coming to Nashville and the almost assured dismal start to the franchise in terms of wins, the organization was faced with the difficult task of marketing this sport that was largely unknown to the city without a clear selling point in a short amount of time to raise the required 12,000 season ticket sales.



Evolution of the Saber-Tooth

The paramount order on the agenda was creating a name and image for the organization to build their brand upon and officially win the franchise. A strategy developed at the inception of the organization and has carried on throughout to make it a success was the franchise’s focus on building a brand with the community rather than creating one and selling it.

Rightfully so, it all began with the excavation of the city in 1971. A landmark discovery of saber-tooth tiger remains was unearthed deep in a cave below downtown Nashville marking only the fifth finding in history of its kind. Thus, the team’s identity was born there some 10,000 years ago and evolved in November of 1997 as the franchise revealed the signature saber-tooth tiger logo (Willis, Bratten, Ramirez, Grimson, Weber, Daunic).



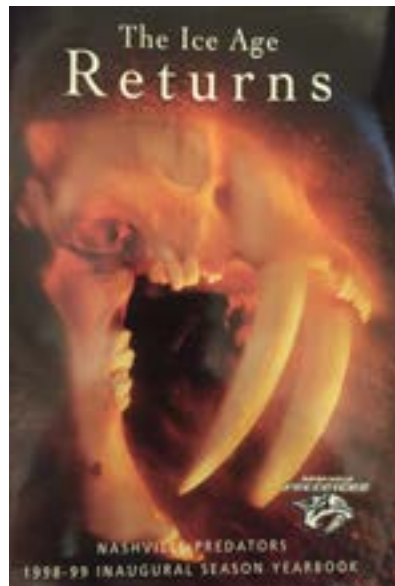
The Predators Are Born

One of the true marks of the franchise’s commitment to making this hockey team the community’s team first took hold in finding the name. With the essence of the team rooted in the saber-tooth tiger image, the organization opted to have fans choose the official name. This move sought to build on the local excitement from securing the provisional rights to a team and instill the notion that this was the fan’s team from the very beginning. After overwhelming entries for the namesake, it was narrowed down to the “Ice Tigers”, the “Fury”, the “Attack”, and Leipold suggestion the “Predators”, which won by fan vote (“Nashville Predators”). The brand had a face, now it needed a meaning.

The Ice Age Returns

Owner Leipold directed their marketing and advertising efforts by enlisting the local yet nationally recognized agency Dye Van Mol & Lawrence to lead the initial efforts (Leipold & Oliver 81). The clock was running and striking swiftly and decisively was key to the life of the franchise. As a result, the organization spent “close to \$100,000 in local promotion within a seven- to ten-day period, just to come in with the ‘The Ice Age Returns’ campaign” featuring the tagline “Don’t Get Left Out of the Cold” (Leipold & Oliver 87).

Nashville's first campaign reflected the deep rooted origins of the saber-tooth logo that perfectly tied in with the sport's icy gameplay. Additionally, the tagline provoked a call to action for the community while playfully contradicting the common phrase "don't get left out in the cold", an eye-catching message that would resonate with this warm city. And it did. The event unleashing this campaign brought in 12,000 fans and sold 3,000 season tickets in the push (Leipold & Oliver 86). However, it was still an uphill battle for the remaining 9,000, which needed to be sold to less die-hard fans.



Phase I

The race for the remaining season tickets and sponsorships in the miniscule six months began immediately. A concise strategy was formed to target three unique markets on a large scale: big businesses, small to midsize businesses, and the typical hockey fan demographic of men 25-49 with high income (Leipold & Oliver 86).

Big Business

The initial strategy for reaching out to the larger Nashville businesses began in a very traditional way. Leipold and the other employees call on community connections to get in the door and pitch the Predators to the companies for ticket packages and sponsorships. However, this effort came up disappointingly short as the many companies had already committed to the NFL's sure-fire machine in the Tennessee Titans who were moving to Nashville shortly (Leipold & Oliver 87). Reevaluation was a necessity and the grassroots nature of the organization showed through in the solution. In an effective guerilla marketing strategy, employees dressed as goal tenders with informational brochures attached to their hockey sticks and showed up at the doors of the businesses (Howard). This innovation of the unorthodox proved much more successful and began to shape a key characteristic of the Predators, standing out amongst of the crowd.

Midsize Business and the Hockey Fan

Fully building and integrating community support, the Predators engaged the smaller business market and their hockey fan demographic with direct mail campaigns. Marketing efforts for the medium to small sized business market led to this segment being the most successful of the initial campaign. Five thousand pucks were shipped to these businesses within a fifty-mile radius with the tagline "the puck travels at the speed of 100 miles per hour, and season tickets are going just as fast". The potential hockey fan market received more traditional print material (Leipold & Oliver 87).

This direct mail strategy for both markets worked to break through the clutter in a cost effective matter. Mailing print material to targeted individuals informed the market with unexpected mail that stood out among the expected bills and envelopes without overspending. The objective was not to sell immediately, with the average rate of return on direct mail typically being a half to two percent of the investment; it was to get potential consumers interested and researching the organization at this stage, and then joining the Predators community as they held events (Richards). Shipping physical pucks to businesses broke through the clutter of promotional materials business are inundated with a six-ounce cylinder of rubber showing up at their door. Their tagline also worked on two levels. First it educated and impressed the consumer with the speed of the game, since Tennessee was traditionally only invested in the high-impact game of football and blistering speed of NASCAR, as well as building urgency and demand with the phrase, "season tickets are going just as fast."



Phase II: Country Music

The second phase of Nashville's push to secure the team and lay the ground work of the organization's brand is the time in which the brand came to life. Phase one focused on an accessible message that everyone in the area could relate to and even calling hockey "football without timeouts" or "NASCAR racing with no caution flags", but the second phase utilized what Nashville was famous for, country music, and embraced it (Eddy, Helper, Harvey, Hancock 10). Or perhaps it is more fitting to say country music embraced them. 1998 kicked off the Predator's "Got Tickets?" campaign in what was certainly crunch time. Nashville bought out billboards in the local areas that featured country music artists, and fans, like Amy Grant, Garth Brooks, Lorrie Morgan, Deana Carter, Martina McBride, and Vince Gill with hockey sticks and blacked out front teeth (Long). The play on the famous "Got Milk" campaign tied Nashville to the heart of the community: country music. Without players, or even jersey at the start of the campaign, these stars built credibility with Nashville and showcased the team as welcome addition.



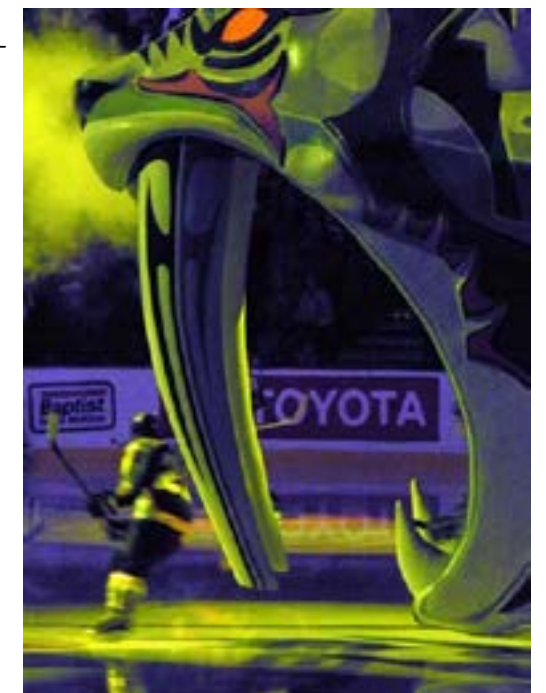
Event Marketing

The heart of the early Predators was fueled by the community that came through and embraced the team as evident with the success of their event marketing. An event was scheduled every thirty days that spiked their sales and eventually made up about 50% of the season ticket sales (Leipold & Oliver 88).

The Ice Breaker Bash kicked it off, the jersey reveal of the sleek navy and white completed the Predators look in February of 1998, but it was the Hockey Tonk Jam at the Ryman Auditorium in March that garnered the most exposure (Willis, Bratten, Ramirez, Grimson, Weber, Daunic). Faith Hill and Tim McGraw headlined the event that turned into a made-for-TV special which aired on the local ABC affiliate (Leipold & Oliver 89). Nashville's largest music stars were already some of the most committed fans to the Predators and the pride in their city propelled Nashville to not only meet their goal, but more importantly, become fully ingrained in the city.

Opening Night

The months of scrambling to win the team had paid off, the Predators had drafted their team, and on October 10, 1998 the puck was set to drop for the first game of many to come. As the players skated onto the ice that Saturday night, the sellout crowd of 17,289 roared in applause that had been building for over a year (Long). But it was not the sellout that characterized the kind the brand Nashville had built with the fans, it was what happened after the loss. The Florida Panthers, defeated and held the home team scoreless in the first ever game with the lowest possible score of 1-0. Not quite the level of high-intensity fans were promised on paper. However, the Predators had established Nashville as the fan's team before the drop of the puck that the crowd gave a standing ovation when the final buzzer sounded (Farber). Nashville went on to set a record of averaging 90% attendance throughout the first losing season with sixteen more sellouts (Leipold & Oliver xv). It was clear the city was fully behind them.



Development of the Brand and Traditions

Enthusiasm was never an issue for the fans attending Nashville's games. And, just as fans learned the game through attending and tuning into Predators University Hockey 101 broadcasts, the Predators organization instilled traditions that began to take on a life of their own (Leipold & Oliver 167). To channel the fan excitement into a cohesive movement, the Predators staff spearheaded the leadership in teaching fans chants (Leipold & Oliver 4). An infamous chant is the "Fang Fingers", in which fans create 'fangs' with their first two fingers and gnash to the screeching from the movie Psycho whenever an opposing player commits a penalty (Willis, Bratten, Ramirez, Grimson, Weber, Daunic). However, chants have taken on an entirely new persona in true Predators fashion. Section 303 in the 'nose-bleeds', colloquially called Cellblock 303, quickly became the loudest section of an already deafening arena by leading their own chants during the game. The organization embraced this fan initiative by adorning the section with a Cellblock 303 banner and even Craig Leipold went up and gave the section a bow during the second season ("Cellblock 303"). Of course the crowd favorite chant at the time was Tim McGraw's Predators music video sounding off "I like it. I love it. I want some more of it!" after every Predators' goal (Leipold & Oliver 5). It is only fitting that Nashville's essence of country music became the most celebratory moments of any game.



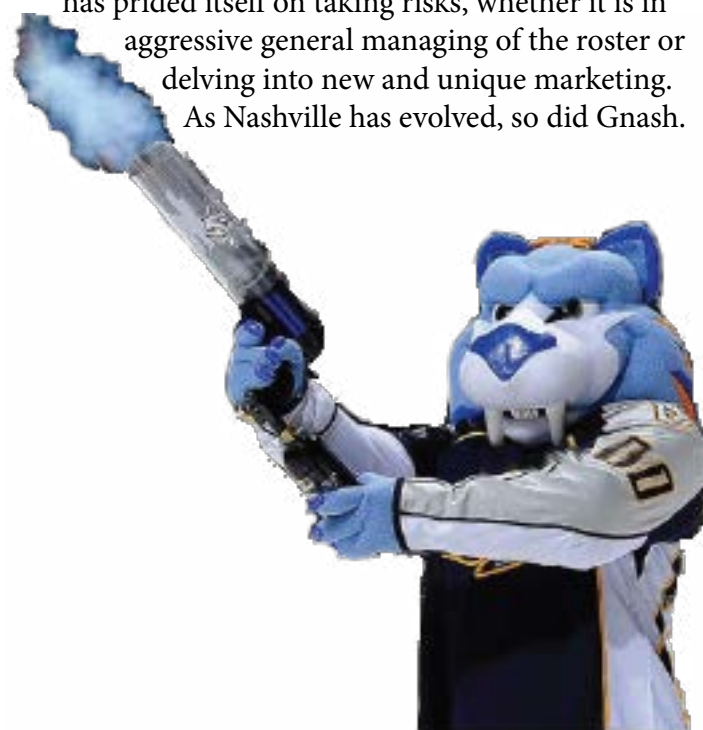
Entertainment For All Fans

One aspect that became an integral part of the Predator experience was the full experience entertainment that the organization aims to offer. The Predators have strived to make attending a game a constantly fun experience from before the drop of the puck to after the game has ended. Creative break fillers like quick

fan quizzes, blasting T-shirts into the stands, and life-sized hamster ball races among hundreds of other events made attending the games a must-see occasion and uniquely Predators experience (Leipold & Oliver 174-183). Commitment to this strategy has also increased the target market to the entire family. Kids may not fully understand the game but eagerly await their chance on the JumboTron video. Adding extra entertainment value became not only a key part of the brand, but also let the organization thrive in a market that has not been raised as die-hard hockey fans. As a result, many of the traditionally established teams do not need to provide this experience, so they don't. The objective for the organization from the beginning has also been to entrance consumers with an experience they did not expect to get them in the door, then convert them to fans once they learn the game first-hand.

Gnash

Personifying the Predators brand in more ways than just look is the team mascot Gnash. Gnash has represented the spirit of Nashville from the beginning modeling the look after a voracious beast for the physical game of hockey, but friendly and accessible to the kids who love him. "We spend a fair amount of time strategizing on the kind of mascot we wanted—the soft, warm huggable type or the tough, athletic one... we got both in Gnash" (Leipold & Oliver 173). As Nashville has evolved, so did Gnash. The organization has prided itself on taking risks, whether it is in aggressive general managing of the roster or delving into new and unique marketing. As Nashville has evolved, so did Gnash.



The organization has prided itself on taking risks, whether it is in aggressive general managing of the roster or delving into new and unique marketing. Gnash has come to represent this as well with death-defying stunts like rapidly rappelling on a swinging pendulum zip line from the rafters to ice level during the pregame festivities ("Nashville Predators"). Like the brand itself, it is hard to find anything else quite like what Nashville has developed as a unique selling proposition.



Rivalry

A signature part of any sports team are the rivalries they have, and the Nashville Predators are no exception. The Detroit Red Wings became the first bitter rivals of the Predators. Massive relocations of the Nissan and Saturn auto works from Detroit brought displaced Red Wings fans to Nashville dressed in red sweaters and a passion for the game (Weber). The Red Wings are a storied franchise and one of the original six teams of the NHL dating back ninety years. Loyalties like that die hard for fans. And, with Detroit playing in the same division as Nashville at the time, it was often that Predators' games would be rambunctiously packed with red, starkly contrasting Nashville's navy and white when the two teams faced off. Naturally, a rivalry formed as the budding newcomers tried to chip away at the then dominant powerhouse of Detroit. However, Nashville did modify a page out of Detroit's playbook and formed a tradition all their own. The Red Wings had a history of throwing an octopus onto the ice in support of the team, but Nashville did one better by tossing the southern water creature, the catfish, onto the ice



starting in 2003 ("Nashville Predators"). It is a Nashville tradition to this day, although it is marginally more difficult to get a catfish through the gates now with universally supplemented security.

Smashville

One of Nashville's most famous campaigns sought to redefine the context of the Predators image in 2002. Attendance had dropped the year before with an average of only 14,838 fans. Marketing needed to step up in an aggressive way and thus Smashville was born: "a mythical town ruled by the love of hockey, where speeding is encouraged, shootings are a common occurrence, offensive behavior is embraced and disturbing the peace is a way of life" ("Predators' New Campaign..."). The distinctive campaign was a far cry from previous branding that keyed in on themes of general support and country music. Smashville put an edge into the welcoming city of Nashville and added an appeal of danger to the brand that mirrored the physicality of hockey. Executions of the concept were featured on tickets, merchandise, and all traditional



forms of media, but the most poignant iteration was the billboard advertising that spray painted an 'S and M' over the 'N' in Nashville of the traditional 'welcome to' signs. However, the Predators never abandoned their roots in community support, despite the dire need for more attendance, as the idea was sourced from over 3,000 fan submissions for a slogan ("Coast to Coast"). This campaign resonated with Predators fans and the slogan became a mainstay and key part of the brand to this day.

Success of the Predators, Death of the Thrashers

Entering the league as another expansion team one year after the Predators was the Atlanta Thrashers, but unlike the Predators, they exited the city and moved to Winnipeg eleven years later becoming a re-boot of the historic Winnipeg Jets. Atlanta seemed like a perfectly viable market for hockey. They had a team before so hockey was not as foreign as it was in

Tennessee, they had a top ten television market compared to Nashville's 33rd ranked at the time, and Atlanta had an arguably better core of businesses to draw in sponsorships (Associated Press) (Burnside). So why did players, fans, and sponsorships leave in droves forcing the sale of the Thrashers and move to Winnipeg while the Predators remained in Tennessee?



Building a Community of Players

A key aspect that Nashville has been successful with from the beginning was building interest in the game rather than solely focusing on marketing the team. The campaign began in the early stages of the team with a program called Predators University. Nashville's organization held a variety of Hockey 101 clinics to educate locals on the game before the drop of the first puck (Howard). This effort continued with broadcasting on television and in-game with headsets and visuals on the JumboTron that explained the rules, strategies, and idiosyncrasies of the game headlined by the experienced Predator announcers (Leipold & Oliver 167-8). After building a solid understanding of the rules and gameplay with the educational campaign, the strategy moved into engagement by encouraging Nashville

and then Tennessee to pick up sticks and play the game themselves.



The Predators had a concise understanding that in order to build sustainable fans they needed to sell hockey. In addition to the significant charitable contributions the organization makes, generating increased interest in the sport has been a top priority. Support for programs like Youth Inc., Learn To Play programs, and the street hockey program Street Pride began as soon as the team was established in Nashville. Taking it a

step further, players offer their own time to travel in the Predators Prowler RV to teach hockey in nearby cities (Leipold & Oliver 199). Additionally, the Predators initiated the Predators Cup that has helped to grow high school hockey from nearly nothing to a competitive tournament in which the top 25 Tennessee teams compete to win. Hands on youth targeted programs have also proven effective in engagement with programs like Get Out And Learn (GOAL!) that provides free hockey clinics, and in-school play programs that bring the equipment and often players to a variety of schools over fifty times per year (Thompson).

Hockey engagement in Atlanta was the direct antithesis of Nashville's plethora of budding programs. "Apparently ignorant of how to build a fan base, ownership made no inroads in selling the game [and] there was nothing in Atlanta to compare to the grassroots initiatives in Anaheim, San Jose and Nashville" (Burnside). This key oversight made the brand entirely too dependent on the on-ice success of the team. When fans are players, their attendance is rooted in a passion for the game, not just a passion for winning. There is also a greater understanding when their team struggles generally. Atlanta failed to ubiquitously build the city's vigor for the sport, and mediocre play driven by substandard management led to the demise of the franchise.

Absentee Ownership Resulting in Bad Hockey

Turner Broadcasting was the original ownership group for the Thrashers. Their sale of the organization in 2005 marked the beginning of the end for Atlanta's hockey as the new group each sued one another in litigation that lasted until 2010 (Allen). With ownership deeply divided and preoccupied, there was no direction for the team like Craig Leipold had provided for the Predators, and the organization suffered as a whole. The Thrashers were perennially underachieving on the ice only making the playoffs once in eleven years and losing all four games in the first round resulting in the swiftest possible elimination (Burnside). Mediocre gameplay coupled with ownership that did not provide a clear direction for the future with the Thrashers resulted in disenchanted fans. From the time of the sale in 2005 to the final season for Atlanta in 2011, Atlanta had a -13.38% average attendance drop compared to Nashville's increase of 11.88%. Furthermore, Atlanta

only had 72.6% capacity on average during their final season and 73.4% the year before while Nashville had 94.3% during the 2010-11 season. (numbers sourced from http://espn.go.com/nhl/attendance/_/year/2011)

Finality

In the end, the Thrashers were sold out of the country, and with two failed franchises, the outlook for Atlanta securing a third one could not be more bleak. The failures lie solely with the organization failing to ingrain the game of hockey and build a community that supported the brand on top of it. Gary Bettman, commissioner of the NHL, actively sought to keep the franchise in Atlanta by proactively and vigorously seeking buyers who would keep the team in the city for two years before the eventual out of market sale (Campbell). There was no one.



In comparison, the Predators too faced an out of market sale to Canada in 2007; however, Nashville's outcome is a stark contrast to Atlanta's fate. Original Nashville owner Craig Leipold announced he would be selling the team after ten years at the helm. The former owner stated that he "couldn't make

it work anymore" as the Predators were "one of the most elite teams in this league and by far the lowest in revenue." Leipold's intentions were for someone else to "take the Nashville Predators to the next level", but after losing \$70 million in his time with the Predators, it was a business decision to move on ("Leipold Selling Nashville Predators"). The original sale was intended to Jim Balsillie, but as he began trying to sell "Hamilton Predators" tickets in Canada, it was clear his intentions were never to keep the team in Nashville and the immediate deal was blocked. Another deal surfaced with William Del Biaggio who too began taking moves to move the team to Kansas City; however, at this time, thirty local investors came forth with a third party bid

to purchase the Predators and keep them in Nashville. After holding a rally and selling over 700 season tickets in one event, the local group had negotiating power and completed the purchase owning 73% share of the organization ("Nashville Predators"). Nashville's commitment to building the sport and brand within the community allowed for the grassroots movement of local executives who believed in the brand, despite the previous owner's extensive losses, and led to the purchase of the organization. Predators Holdings LLC now consists of local executives in finance, health care, and a variety of private businesses (Willis, Bratten, Ramirez, Grimson, Weber, Daunic).

2011 Brand Revamp

A drastic overhaul of the brand's look took place in 2011 for Nashville. Nashville's tried and true navy and white color scheme, apart from the mustard alternate jersey that ran from 2001-07, were retired and replaced with solid gold (Fitts). This new branding direction was hinted at during the 2010-11 playoffs when the arena provided gold shirts and rally towels to 'gold-out' the stands (Hughes). Navy had become an overplayed color in the National Hockey League. Nashville's goal was to take the idea of standing out that had become part of the brand for the city and apply it physically to the league with unique colors and design that represented them. After insightful focus group testing, fan input, and design meetings with Reebok, the Predators released the new color scheme, streamlined logo, and jersey design that featured Nashville's musical roots (Willis, Bratten, Ramirez, Grimson, Weber, Daunic II).





“The logo and uniforms for the 2011-12 season were designed to develop a powerful, long-term brand message and help infuse new life into the Nashville Predators imagery and brand with a more contemporary, aggressive, streamlined logo that still maintains the basic Pred[ators] Head concept. A new secondary logo was also designed to represent the state flag of Tennessee and Nashville’s Music City heritage simultaneously, with a guitar pick shape incorporating the three stars of the state’s three grand divisions – West, Middle and East. The “Predators Gold” sweaters create a distinctive, dominant, bold look that balances traditional elements of classic uniforms, with those unique to Nashville — guitar strings in the numbering and lettering, fangs in the neck area and piano keys on the inside of the collars.”

–Predators Website

In an interview with General Manager David Poile, he discussed some of the inspiration behind the new identity. Poile remarked that the Predators wanted their own unique identity that would stand out against rivals like Chicago’s vibrant red or St. Louis’ bright blue. Taking notes from their Knoxville neighbor, Poile mentions that the gold works like the University of Tennessee’s bright orange. “It’s not a normal color you’d wear every day, but when you come to the games, you put on your gold... the fans love it, so it’s good for us” (Fox).

The Gold Prevails

Although the redesign was met with some mixed reception, the majority was overwhelmingly positive as Nashville finally had a brand that physically represented the uniqueness that it had from the beginning (Smith). With the welcome reception to change, the gold took on even more iterations. In 2013 the Predators dyed the ice rink gold for the kids camp that was being held there over the summer, a move that garnered a lot of attention to the brand and even more ‘yellow snow’ jokes (Scott). For the 2014-15 season, the Predators goal song needed to be changed to disassociate the brand with the previous artist’s song who had just been found guilty of criminal charges. And as a natural replacement, the Black Key’s ‘Gold on the



Ceiling’ became a new tradition (Tahara). Finally, in the 2015-16 season, gold became even more pervasive as the team donned gold helmets for home Saturday games (Fox). Fans of Nashville have taken to the new brand identity rapidly, and in only four short years the revamp is an integral part of the identity for the team.

Nashville Today

The Nashville Predators are firmly entrenched in the heart of Nashville today. What started as a calculated gamble in a nontraditional southern hockey market has become a crucial part of the city that is still trending upwards. Attendance at the arena has broken the franchise record for sellouts this season and average capacity at 99.2% up from 98.5% the previous year (Boclair). The brand has also become highly profitable, now estimated at \$255 million and generated consistent revenue for shareholders (“Nashville Predators” Forbes).

All Star Host

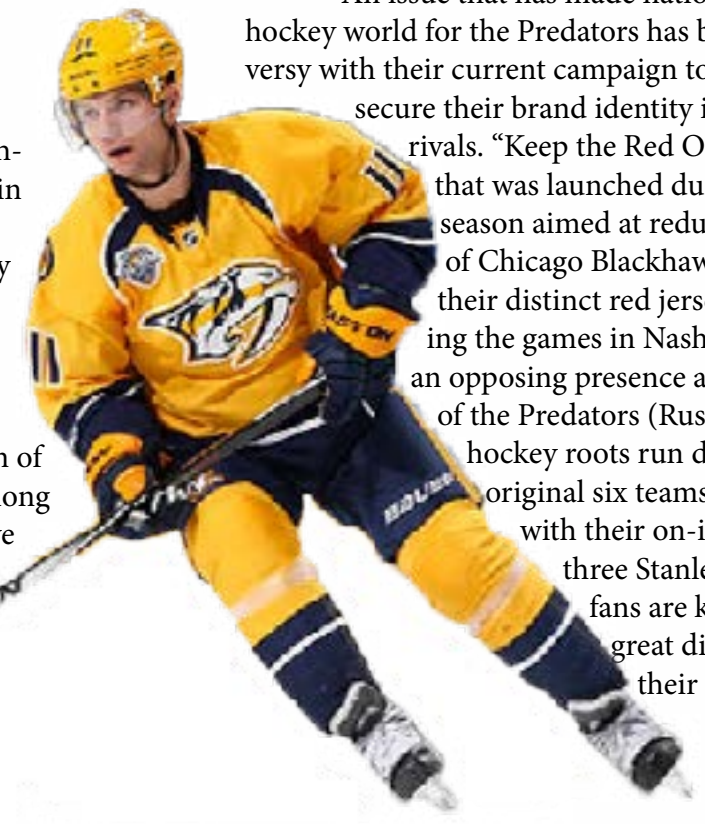
2016 also marked the year Nashville hosted the annual All Star events in which the top performers compete in skills events and an All Star game every year besides the Winter Olympics. As Craig Leipold had hoped when he sold the Predators, the new leadership secured key deals with Bridgestone to sponsor the arena and the construction of the Music City Convention Center, among other revitalization of the city, that have proved instrumental in securing the spectacle events. The league traveled to Nashville and fans from all over,

estimated at 59,000, enjoyed the main events as well as the variety of events for Fan Fair hosted in the convention center as well as free concerts on the bustling streets of the city (Rau). Television ratings for the All Star game also hit a historic high for NBCSN at an overnight rating of 1.17, up 24% from the previous year (Bonesteel). While there was some compelling storylines resulting in an underdog player being fan-voted into the All Stars that likely boosted ratings, Nashville did an extraordinary job hosting the games and the exposure continued to affirm the organization and city on a national map.



Current Obstacles

An issue that has made national news in the hockey world for the Predators has been the controversy with their current campaign to overwhelmingly secure their brand identity in Nashville against rivals. “Keep the Red Out” is a campaign that was launched during the 2013-14 season aimed at reducing the number of Chicago Blackhawks fans, known for their distinct red jerseys, from attending the games in Nashville and providing an opposing presence as a long-time rival of the Predators (Russell). Chicago’s hockey roots run deep as one of the original six teams in the league, and with their on-ice success winning three Stanley Cups since 2010, fans are known for traveling great distances to watch their team.



The Predators released their new brand identity with the “Behold the Gold” campaign (Smith).



The ticket policies have evolved over the years starting with only offered two-game packages to instead of the single ticket option that eventually offered exclusive gold giveaways to strategically limiting the sale of tickets to Nashville's television markets and preventing resale as well as blocking third party sales to out of market fans (Scoville). These policies have been met with extreme criticism, most notably by Chicago fans and reporters calling them ineffective and discriminatory. And while this is not a permanent solution to Nashville's core problem with creating a dominant gold presence, the policies have proved somewhat effective as the "red impact" is restricted and attendance still climbs.

The Predators

Nashville's growth from hockey anonymity to a vibrant culture has not been without its growing pains, but has ultimately become a posterchild for success in nontraditional markets. Originally displaced Red Wings fans have embraced the gold and have come to be known affectionately as "Predwings". Long standing traditions are fervently in place with catfish still being hurtled onto the ice and home grown chants being shouted from the rafters (Godfrey). Nashville has become known as a city players and fans love in one of the loudest stadiums bursting with team support despite the team being held without a championship win. The Predators continue down the promising path with the confidence that the brand was built on sturdy ground of community support and innovation while acknowledging the city's roots in music. With steadfast creative branding the Predators have truly become the embodiment of Nashville and vice versa.



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