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League May Seek Other Sponsorship Deals After One-Off With Fast Feeder

By Jeremy Mullman

In the latest sign of ads creeping onto one of the few pristine places left in major-league sports, the WNBA has sold space on its jerseys to McDonald's.

As part of a sponsorship of the WNBA's season-opening week, the fast feeder's logo will appear on the front of all 14 team jerseys during early-season contests, including three nationally televised games.

The WNBA designed the McJerseys to help the Golden Arches launch its Southern-style chicken breakfast sandwich, which is being hyped with a national sampling effort May 15, two days before the women's basketball league's season kickoff.

And although this is a one-time deal, WNBA President Donna Orender said it was likely the league would look to sell jersey space again in the future. "There are more partners out there that we'll be talking to about it," she said. "It could happen, yes."

The move continues a trend begun by Major League Soccer, which sold ads on its uniform shorts and sleeves when it started up in 1996. The MLS expanded that effort to allow individual teams to sell "front-jersey" ads two years ago after the Red Bull brand bought the New York-area franchise.

Spreading trend

More recently, other leagues have been flirting with jersey ads as a potentially lucrative new revenue stream. The Boston Red Sox wore the logo of data-storage giant EMC during exhibition games in Japan this year. And a group of National Hockey League stars have been pushing their league to adopt jersey ads as a means of compensating for the league's relatively meager broadcast-revenue deal.

The WNBA's move is perhaps most notable because the league is owned by the National Basketball Association, which -- if it followed its sibling -- would be the first major professional sports league to let its teams sell uniform ads during regular-season games.

Ms. Orender said the NBA had no "imminent" plans to experiment with jersey ads but added, "Whatever we do, they watch closely."

The WNBA deal also gives McDonald's naming rights for the season's opening week -- which will be known as "WNBA Tipoff Presented by McDonald's" -- as well as on-court decals, branded pole pads and seatbacks, and courtside signage.

'Unique position'

John Lewicki, director-sports marketing for McDonald's USA, said the opportunity to put its logo on a pro-sports jersey was appealing. "There aren't a whole lot of opportunities to do it," he said. "It's a unique position, and we like the idea."

Mr. Lewicki said the WNBA deal was the best sports opportunity to market to women the Southern-style sandwich, which will also be available in a biscuit bun at breakfast. The fast-food giant is using Nascar to target men through sports.

The opening-week sponsorship deal also will let McDonald's capitalize on the professional debut of University of Tennessee star Candace Parker, a college-basketball legend best known for being the first woman to dunk twice in a game and also for leading her team to last season's NCAA title. (Ms. Parker has already signed endorsement deals with Gatorade and Adidas and is starring in WNBA ads promoting the coming season.)