The National Football League currently stands as the most popular and lucrative professional sports organization in America. During the 2011-2012 season, the NFL's revenue grew by $500 million, reaching an estimated $9.5 billion. This number puts the NFL nearly two billion dollars ahead of its closest competitor, Major League Baseball.¹ Yet, those in charge of the league do not seem satisfied with domination over the American market. The National Football League’s worldwide presence is, overall, quite limited. NFL commissioner Roger Goodell and his team are making it a top priority to change this. They feel that so-called “American football” has the potential for further growth outside of the United States. Since 2007, the NFL has hosted one regular-season game in London each year as part of its International Series. Goodell sees this as an effective means of furthering European interest in the sport as he attempts to increase the NFL’s popularity and marketability in the region. This represents a progression in the strategy of the league for internationalization after the failure of NFL Europe. In his own words, “Each year, the different barometers indicate that our popularity continues to rise... I think the next step will be multiple games [in Europe]. And if that is successful then I think the idea of a franchise here is realistic.”²

The NFL International Series does not represent the first foray of the league into international territory. From 1995 to 2007, NFL Europe attempted at globalizing the game, while serving as a developmental league for the NFL’s primary teams. At the time of its disbanding in 2007, the league consisted of six teams. Five
of them were based in Germany, and one was located in Amsterdam. The league was wrought with instability. During its time of operation, teams would frequently relocate or disband altogether. The failure of NFL Europe serves as an important case study in light of the current goals of the league for expansion. Questions of how and why the past project was so unsuccessful are vital in determining future success for American football abroad. The league was undoubtedly a financial failure. By its final year of operation, NFL Europe was losing somewhere in the neighborhood of $30 million a season. Even in Germany, where the league was by far the most popular, games received little television exposure. Actual attendance was also mediocre at best. Attendance figures rarely exceeded 20,000 spectators. While the people that went reportedly seemed to enjoy the more relaxed “party” atmosphere of the games, relative to soccer, there still was not a large enough fan base to support the league.

Several factors contribute to the lack of support for NFL Europe. On the surface, the core idea of the league seemed to destine it for failure. The purpose of NFL Europe was to serve as a developmental league. Bringing this type of organization to a region without a history of the actual sport being played seems quite puzzling. Developmental leagues for other American professional sports struggle even within our own borders. Most people would be hard-pressed to name even one NBA D-League team. The case of Minor League Baseball is very much the same. The stadium of the local minor league team in my region, the New Britain Rock Cats, was a frequent site for elementary school birthday party outings. Other than that, there was never much of a fan base. It is hard to rally behind a team of less-than stellar players, even in a sport that you know and love. Therefore, it is no surprise that there was not a huge amount of support for NFL Europe.

Another essential difference lies in the fact that the NBA and MLB developmental leagues are actually necessary. Since playing baseball in college prior to joining a professional team is infrequent, a developmental league is valuable for the MLB – contrary to football, where virtually all professional players have successful college careers before being drafted by the NFL. In the case of the NBA, teams maintain small rosters of only 13 active players, so having an affiliate team adds depth. NFL teams, however, are already allowed incredibly deep rosters of 53 players, as well as additional practice squad players. The farm system aspect of NFL Europe never really panned out. The league hardly produced any notable players. The biggest names to come out of NFL Europe were quarterbacks Kurt Warner and Jake Delhomme, but those are only two noteworthy players to emerge in more than a decade. Therefore, it is no surprise that the NFL was willing to pull the plug on the league. The owners were pouring money into the organization and seeing little to no results.

NFL Europe was largely an exercise in experimentation for the National Football League. In fact, the attitudes of the league toward the project seem to represent this fact. NFL Europe was essentially treated as a testing ground. For example, “when the NFL’s powerful competition committee wanted to sample a potential rule change, to see how it affected the game in application instead of theory, it could

"NFL commissioner Roger Goodell and his team are making it a top priority to change this. They feel that so-called ‘American football’ has the potential for further growth outside of the United States"
tinker with those changes by enacting them in NFL Europa first.” This was often praised as one of the positive aspects of the league. While it was beneficial in some ways, it also sent the wrong message. In order to get another country (let alone an entire continent) interested in a sport that is utterly foreign to them, it makes much more sense to introduce them to competition at the highest level. By using NFL Europe in order to test out possible rule changes for the “real” NFL, the league was essentially acknowledging the inferiority of the overseas organization. Add this to the fact that the league was comprised of the players that were not seen as possible contributors to the American teams, and one starts to understand why NFL Europe was not a permanent solution to the NFL’s attempts at globalization.

The market for actual NFL games abroad was first tested in 2005, when the league held its first regular season game outside of the U.S. in Mexico City. The game was a huge success, drawing the largest crowd an NFL game had ever seen. A total of 103,467 were in attendance at this international event. The annual games in London represented the next step, and they have since been surprisingly successful. The games have averaged an attendance of over 80,000 spectators at London’s Wembley Stadium. These numbers are significant, as the average attendance at an NFL game in the U.S. is about 66,000. Television numbers in Europe have also increased tremendously since the NFL began hosting games at Wembley. Super Bowl ratings have increased 74% since 2006, and viewership of Sunday games has risen 154% over the same period. The NFL plans to ride this success and further their growth by hosting multiple games in London. Starting with the 2013 season, two regular season games will be played in Europe each year. The Jacksonville Jaguars are scheduled to play one home game at Wembley for the next four seasons, perhaps in an effort to position them for relocation to London.

The overall success of the International Series is yet to be seen. Up to this point, everything seems to be going well. The outcome of the multiple-games-per-season strategy will likely be the determining factor. In the words of Lou Imbriano, who served as the New England Patriots’ Chief Marketing Officer, as well as Chief Operating Officer of the New England Revolution, “One game is easy…everyone can stop for that one time of year. In the next year or two you’ll see them playing two games. That will really be the test.” If the NFL is able to sell a substantial number of tickets to both of the Wembley games over the next few seasons, then the option of having a franchise in London will more than likely be pursued. According to Chris Parsons, the Vice President of International Business for the NFL, the current fan base in London would have to be doubled before considering having a team based in the city.

It is possible that the international growth of the NFL will be limited, however. The process of introducing a sport to a region where there is no substantial history or culture
of playing the game is difficult no matter what. In the case of American football, things are particularly problematic. Football is one of the most rules-based, strategic sports in the world. There are literally thousands of rules in the NFL, the majority of which most American fans would be unable to name. Each team plays a different style of both offense and defense based on its roster and coaching staff. The outcomes of games are heavily based on play calling, which again, varies dramatically between teams. A greater understanding of the game absolutely needs to be brought to Europe if the NFL wants to become a fixture in the region.

During the first International Series game held in London, the NFL committed a portion of the game to educating fans on the sport. Segments shown during TV timeouts explained some of the finer points and rules of the game. It is interesting that the NFL went about educating the fans in this fashion. It seems almost as if it were an afterthought. An understanding of the game, even if only basic, should logically come before one actually purchases tickets and gets to the stadium. Few people want to watch a sporting matchup they cannot understand or with which they cannot identify. In between the 2007 and 2008 International Series games, it seems as though the NFL realized how much it might benefit them if Europeans clearly understood what was going on. Their solution was an online-based, interactive seminar called Coach Stilo. This activity can still be found on the NFL’s website today, but it is far from perfect. It makes a large effort to be comical, to the point that one cannot help but think that it is overdone. It involves Coach Stilo belittling the “rookie” (the viewer) by whipping the ball at him as he walks into his office, and just talking down to him in general. It also inexplicably starts with an activity in kicking a field goal. There is no preface to this at all, leaving the viewer unsure of why they are kicking an object through two yellow posts. It is clear that this was chosen as a starting point because many European fans are said to identify with the kicking and punting aspects of the game due to their familiarity with rugby and soccer.

Many advocate a more grassroots approach for the spread of American football abroad. Such a method would increase both the popularity and understanding of the game in many ways. Jack Bechta of the National Football Post says that most of the European NFL fans that he has met while attending the International Series games became fans in one of three ways. They picked up the game either by attending college in America, living or working in the United States, or by watching the NFL on European television with American friends. NFL Europe served to increase exposure to a degree, but according to Bechta, “several fans told me they would go just to see the cheerleaders, do the wave and watch the kicks.”

Bechta’s findings match up with my experiences studying abroad at Venice International University. The only foreign classmate I found who was an NFL fan picked up the game during the time he spent living in New Jersey. He then brought his passion for the game home with him when he moved back to Japan and played for his private high school’s American football team. He continues to follow the New York Jets, and purchases the NFL’s Gamepass so that he can tune in to the online game streams every Sunday. The NFL should embrace and help foster such occurrences. Bechta proposes that the NFL make an effort to educate international students living in the U.S. by selling books on the basics of football in college bookstores, and developing (hopefully more straightforward) instructional webpages on their website. This strategy seems as though it would be successful. Since American football is so engrained in our
society, having people experience it first in the United States would make them more likely to enjoy it and sustain their enthusiasm and interest when they return home.

It is remarkable how many aspects of American culture are associated with the sport of football. It is deeply rooted in the Thanksgiving tradition, as millions of families tune in to watch the games following dinner. Sundays in America have become a day more focused on the NFL than on any sort of religious observance. Kevin Quirk, in his discussion of “Sports Glut USA,” points out the saturation of American culture with sports. Much of his discussion is centered on the growth of the NFL and its commercial marketability. The emergence of ESPN eventually led to an explosion of sports programming, and in turn NFL ratings soared. This caused the Super Bowl to become “more of a national holiday than a mere football game.” Then, Monday Night Football eventually came into the mix and proved that sports could occupy primetime television. Now, “the tardy rates at work and school on Tuesday morning stand among many enduring symbols of this entrenched ritual.”17 The diction Quirk uses is telling. Football truly is imbedded within American society and culture. Videos such as “Terry Tate Office Linebacker” and ESPN’s “This is SportsCenter” commercials demonstrate the deep connection between American football and society. The line between celebrity and NFL star is also increasingly blurred. Players such as Chad "Ochocinco" Johnson and Terrell Owens are as famous for their off-field antics and reality TV-show stunts as they are for their playing abilities. Therefore, the NFL represents much more than just a sporting organization.

Replicating such a cultural crossover between the sport and society in general is certainly difficult to accomplish overseas. This is why the NFL would benefit by converting foreigners visiting the U.S. into devout football fans. Still, steps can be taken toward developing a support system for American football overseas. A stronger presence of ESPN programming in Europe would be beneficial. A channel called “ESPN America” airs in the U.K. and its lineup includes American football highlights. Further expanding the availability of this station within Britain, as well as the rest of Europe, would help saturate the television market with American football. One of the common European criticisms of the sport is that it is too slow-paced and involves too much inactivity and stoppage time. Showing more highlight reels and top plays would help to condense the material and get Europeans focused on the most exciting aspects of the game, all while increasing exposure.

The furthering of the grassroots expansion of the NFL would aid in the effort to engrain the sport in European culture.

The furthering of the grassroots expansion of the NFL would aid in the effort to engrain the sport in European culture as well. Currently, the NFL puts on clinics for about 100,000 children around the world each year in order to teach them the sport of American football.18 If this number were increased, perhaps it would lead to the development of interest in European youth leagues. As it stands, European schoolchildren choose soccer across the board as the sport to play in their leisure time. If interest in American football can be fostered among the European youth, then this might be an effective means of disseminating the sport throughout the continent. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell recognizes the importance of this, saying, “That is one of our challenges, how do we promote a sport that is not played by the youth in each of..."
those markets? But I think that is where media and bringing our game to those markets meets those challenges." One of the biggest issues with the development of American football in the European market is that there is no real system for players to partake in the sport. There is no set path that a kid interested in the sport can follow from youth leagues, to junior high, all the way through high school and college. The creation of such a system in the area, while difficult, would be instrumental in the sport taking hold. The only way to start the process is to continue getting people interested from the ground up, preferably by focusing on the youth.

One country where American football is surprisingly taking hold is India. The Elite Football League of India represents one of these grassroots efforts to introduce a system of American football abroad. While not funded by the NFL directly, the league has managed to raise $8.5 million, and continues to expand. Investors include former NFL players who believe that there is much potential for the game to take hold in the region. The case in India echoes the expansion of the NFL into Europe. The biggest challenge has been getting people to understand the sport. Many of those interested in the league, similarly, picked up their interest from time spent in the United States. Take the case of Amit Paranjape, who studied in Wisconsin and then lived in Dallas for twelve years. Paranjape is a huge fan of both the Packers and the Cowboys, but when he tuned into the Elite Football League’s games on television, he was sorely disappointed at the low level of competition. While the league certainly will not serve as a replacement for the NFL, what it does do is create a system where people can cultivate their interest in American football. People love the game so much, in fact, that numerous players took a pay cut, leaving desirable day jobs in order to play for the league. Indian sports columnist Venkat Ananth wants the NFL to undertake efforts in India similar to the European International Series. “You can’t impose a sport on the Indian audience. You have to build it up. Bring your stars here, play one of those games like they do in England. Otherwise, there is no point.”

A system of progression for developing players is particularly important for American football relative to other major sports. This is because of the equipment barrier. Football equipment is both extremely expensive and difficult to find. One can barely find a ball outside of the United States, let alone shoulder pads, helmets, girdles and cleats. Football is not a sport that you can just casually decide to get up and play. Pickup games exist, but they are severely bastardized versions of the sport. Since American football requires separate squads for offense and defense, and specific playing techniques depending on position, there is no such thing as a meaningful pickup game. A soccer game between friends with just a ball and two makeshift goals is much closer to the real sport than a two-hand touch football game with one lineman on each team and blitz counts of “five Mississippi”. Even serious American football players in the U.S. usually do not own their own equipment, so athletes are dependent on a league or team to provide pads and helmets. The development of additional clinics, camps, school teams, and leagues abroad would hopefully help to overcome this equipment barrier.

Due to the equipment barrier and the strict rules that regulate American football, the game cannot be adapted significantly to meet the needs of players in some regions. Technique can be modified to a certain degree. Different plays can be developed, players can choose whether to use a power or finesse style, but everything must work within a certain framework. For this reason, American football cannot experience a true process of “tropicalization” like soccer.
Soccer in South America was played “by the poor who enriched it while they appropriated it... this foreign sport became Brazilian, fertilized by the creative energies of the people discovering it.” With its more open field and continuous style of play, soccer allows for greater variation in style than American football. It would prove interesting to see how certain techniques can be modified to meet the strengths of European players, while still fitting within the structured set of regulations that American football maintains. Perhaps special teams can play a larger role, with rugby and soccer players contributing their kicking and punting skills. Since rugby is similar to American football in many ways, these players could also bring new ideas and strategies for running and passing the ball. Although it seems that overall the game would remain the same since there are such strict playing guidelines.

Interestingly enough, rugby could be quite influential in terms of safety. While American football has a reputation for being violent, it is not too far off from rugby, which is also an extremely rough sport. Rugby has far fewer serious injuries, however. An important factor in this is that rugby players wear substantially less protective equipment. While it seems counterintuitive, the use of helmets and pads can actually add to the risk of injury. Essentially, the equipment becomes a sort of weapon. Matters of player safety, at this point, are a primarily domestic issue for the NFL rather than an international one. As more and more research is done on brain trauma associated with the sport of American football, changes may need to be implemented in the game. Whatever these changes may be, they will be implemented abroad as well. Perhaps international factors can be part of the solution in terms of player safety. If the crossover between rugby and American football increases, then there may be an innovative middle ground in terms of protective gear. Players could wear enough equipment to feel protected in the short run (as opposed to the bareness of rugby), without having to be subjected to the lifelong consequences that can result from the excessive amount of equipment currently used in the NFL.

A huge portion of the American population grows up in a culture of football. I personally was brought up with elements of the game surrounding me on many levels. My friends and I played the EA Sports Madden videogames each year, we watched NFL highlight reels on SportsCenter before school, and we participated in youth league football. All of these things helped foster an appreciation for, and an understanding of, the game of American football. While it is unrealistic to expect similar cases to start popping up in Europe right away, a movement geared toward expanding the
sport with a grassroots approach would likely be effective. Developing a system for European players to get involved would also be vitally important if the NFL wants to become a fixture in the region. Europeans are currently extremely underrepresented in the NFL, and even when NFL Europe existed, there were a limited number of players from European countries. Fan interest in a sport is definitely limited if people cannot relate to the games that are being played. There are strong ties between sport and nationalism, so Europeans have to feel actively engaged in the sport of football, rather than being force-fed an American game.

The general consensus within the NFL is that Europe is the next frontier. The owners and top decision makers feel as though they are close to tapping out the American market, which the NFL clearly dominates. In the eyes of the league, there is going to be a time when expansion to Europe is necessary if they want to continue growth. It is more a question of how to go about conducting the expansion, than if it should be carried out at all. The failed case of NFL Europe helped to increase European exposure to the sport, even if only marginally. The new strategy of playing regular NFL games abroad represents a positive progression, and sends a better message to European audiences. In many ways, the NFL’s current strategy for globalization seems more promising. The hosting of regular NFL games overseas allows foreign populations to experience the most intensely competitive American football. Even if the European fans do not understand all the intricacies of American football, it is quite easy to distinguish between amateur and professional levels of competition. It would then stand to reason that hosting the best gridiron matchups possible abroad would lead to more interest and success than the watered down NFL Europe games produced.

“The general consensus within the NFL is that Europe is the next frontier.”

The simple fact is that if the NFL has an opportunity to make money abroad, it will pursue it in order to pursue greater profits. The commercialization of modern professional sport means that the NFL will do whatever is necessary to continue increasing its profits. The success that they have seen in the international market thus far indicates that they can be profitable outside of the U.S. If their strategy of playing two international games per year is successful, then the NFL is making it quite clear that they are seriously considering bringing a franchise to London. However, whether this will be the best strategy is unclear. The logistics of the situation would be difficult: scheduling games, arranging flights, and luring free agents to an international team would all prove challenging.

To be successful, the NFL is going to need an exceptionally inclusionary approach toward globalization. Games that are not so heavily regulated by rules like soccer and basketball are undoubtedly easier to transplant across nations. However, that is not to say that American football cannot be successful abroad. The NFL has to tread carefully, taking one step at a time. Doing so will ensure that they do not get ahead of themselves and set themselves up for failure again, as was the case with NFL Europe. In the words of Senior Vice President of Sales, Marketing, and International Affairs Mark Waller, “It’s the most complicated team sport on the planet... If we can create an understanding, that will make a huge difference.”

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