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Business Off The Pitch: Sporting KC Using Soccer To Create Social Change

Goal.com speaks with Doug Ulman, CEO of LIVESTRONG, and David Ficklin, Vice President of Development at Sporting Kansas City

By Christopher Savino
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June 9th will mark the introduction of a new and innovative approach to the way which stadium-naming rights reflect the objectives of both a professional sports team and a business.

Sporting Club, the parent organization of Sporting Kansas City, has partnered with LIVESTRONG for LIVESTRONG Sporting Park, the first professional sports stadium that allows a nonprofit organization to appear as the major sponsor.

During recent interviews with Doug Ulman, CEO of LIVESTRONG, and David Ficklin, Vice President of Development at Sporting Kansas City, both commented on the importance of the partnership and its overall impact on various communities.

The club, who most recently played at CommunityAmerica Ballpark, a multipurpose stadium in Kansas City, had yet to identify one stadium as its home, but in June, Sporting Kansas City will add its name to the growing list of MLS teams with soccer-specific stadiums.

When asked about the excitement that is building as June approaches, he commented, "We hope everyone loves [the stadium] as much as we want them to love it. This project has been intensely personal for everyone who has worked on it for the past four years."

Thirteen clubs will have their own stadium by the end of the 2011 regular season and it is more important now than ever for Kansas City to capitalize on this opportunity.

Ficklin noted, "Kansas City never experienced soccer in a soccer facility. There has been a

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including an opportunity to serve as the Venue Director of the 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup held in the United States, Ficklin joined Sporting Kansas City (then Kansas City Wizards) in a similar capacity.

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real challenge in growing the fan base; it has so much to do with not having your own venue."

The commitment of fans to attending matches will not only support the club, but it will support a greater cause – something bigger than the sport.

During an interview with LIVESTRONG CEO, Doug Ulman, we discussed LIVESTRONG's role in the partnership and how a business can "use the sport of soccer to create massive social change."



Goal.com: It has been mentioned that Sporting KC and LIVESTRONG have strong ties, even well before this deal. Can you discuss LIVESTRONG's relationship with the Kansas City-based soccer club and where you see the relationship going for the long-term?

LIVESTRONG: *Our newly formed relationship is with Sporting Club and we are currently focused on planning extensive activation for our mission with LIVESTRONG Sporting Park. LIVESTRONG and Sporting Club both believe that in sport, in life and in the fight to beat cancer, you need a strong team to win. Sporting KC and the sport of soccer provide LIVESTRONG a great opportunity to spread health and wellness messages that underscore the spirit of cancer survivorship. We understand that several of the Sporting KC players have personal connections to cancer and we look forward to working with them to champion our cause off the field.*

Goal.com: How was LIVESTRONG able to secure the naming rights to Sporting Park? What was your role in helping to secure the naming rights for Sporting Park? Can you comment what role Lance Armstrong played in developing this partnership?

LIVESTRONG: *I was approached by the partners of Sporting Club about the naming of their new stadium late last year. It was exactly the type of bold, audacious and innovative business opportunity we are attracted to. After some discussions with our board, we decided to go for it and moved quickly to announce the partnership.*

Lance is incredibly supportive of this relationship as exhibited by his participation in the stadium announcement in March. He recognizes the tremendous potential this opportunity has for the foundation and for the cancer community in Kansas City.

LIVESTRONG's role in securing the rights was to help co-develop the partnership by providing our licensing parameters. This is an especially unique partnership – unlike anything we have ever done – so we found ourselves charting new and exciting territory. Normally companies pay stadiums for the naming rights, but that's not the case here. Together with Sporting Club, we have created a revolutionary model in which our cause is supported by licensing the rights of our brand.

Goal.com: Naming rights typically provide a sports team (or owner) with a significant amount of revenue. Do you see the way LIVESTRONG and Sporting KC have worked together

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possible in not only other MLS stadiums, but with other professional sports teams (i.e. MLB, NFL, etc.) in the United States and abroad?

LIVESTRONG: *LIVESTRONG Sporting Park will be the only stadium in the United States to bear our brand currently. Partnering with other professional sports teams would be a possibility, but not other MLS teams. We are interested to see if other non-profits and sports organizations will adopt this business model. We'd love to see it change the world of philanthropy.*

Goal.com: At the announcement of LIVESTRONG Sporting Park, you mentioned to "use the sport of soccer to create massive social change is incredibly appealing and exciting." The biggest question I have is, why Kansas City? Why do you feel this is the right market for a LIVESTRONG stadium? And in the future do you see LIVESTRONG seeking larger opportunities to not only market itself, but to impact communities in this way?

LIVESTRONG: *Absolutely! We were opportunistic and saw a terrific opportunity to support their community affected by cancer. The LIVESTRONG community is at the heart of our success. We've built an entire brand out of grassroots action. Our partnership with Sporting Club and the opening of the LIVESTRONG Sporting Park gives us a chance to shape our presence in the community. We plan to develop and strengthen that network in Kansas City by building and connecting LIVESTRONG programs, resources and community members on the ground, in order to maximize their impact in a way that will benefit people affected by cancer in that region.*

The partnership between LIVESTRONG and Sporting Club marks a new era in the business model of partnerships. Sometimes the ability to give back to the local community and improve the lives of the over twenty-eight million people worldwide who suffer from cancer is recognized as more important than the bottom line.

For more information about LIVESTRONG Sporting Park, please visit the stadium's [website](#).

Christopher Savino is a columnist for [Goal.com](#). His feature, "Business Off The Pitch" appears every Monday. Contact Chris at csavino@businessofsoccer.com with questions, comments and concerns or follow him on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/chrissavino>

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