

An Organizational Development Model for Mestis Hockey League

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<p>Sport leagues and organizations are unique in many respects because they operate both as businesses and as sport operators. This poses various challenges to how a sport organization can be developed, what is the focus of the development, who can decide on the change or development and who implements it.</p> <p>The purpose of this study was to examine the current situation of second highest competitive hockey league in Finland, the Mestis Hockey League, and its organizations and discover how key stakeholder groups such as Mestis organization chairs, players, personnel and fans see Mestis in its current form and how they would like to see Mestis develop. The study was approached from both a personal perspective and data acquired through semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders from various Mestis organizations (N=10).</p> <p>The results indicate that many of the participants had concerns about the current position of Mestis, particularly the financial situation of the league and its organizations. The main development points for the Mestis Hockey League were considered increasing the value, appreciation and status of Mestis. In addition, the possibility of promotion from Mestis to Liiga was seen by the participants as a crucial part of the development of Mestis, and that promotion should be based on both sporting success and meeting financial conditions. The participants also envisioned more effective and fluent cooperation between the Mestis and Liiga leagues in terms of player transfers, the overall league systems and the marketing of both leagues.</p> <p>The results of this study imply that the Mestis Hockey League must take action to increase the visibility, status and appreciations of Mestis, and to improve the financial situation of the league and its organizations. This can be achieved through improved cooperation with the Finnish Ice Hockey Association, Liiga and Mestis, and with more focus placed on detailed and efficient sport marketing, management and development efforts.</p>	
Keywords sport organization, sport development, Finnish ice hockey	

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	My Connection to the Study	2
1.2	Purpose of the Study.....	4
1.3	Research Questions.....	5
2	Mestis as a Hockey League	6
2.1	Organizations and Teams in Mestis	8
2.2	Administration	9
2.3	Marketing, Sales and Finance.....	10
2.4	Case: Peliitat Heinola.....	12
3	Developing a Sport Organization.....	15
3.1	Key Elements of Sport Organizations	15
3.2	The Development Process	17
3.3	Appealing to the Customer	19
3.4	Mestis SWOT Analysis	20
4	Materials and Methods.....	23
4.1	Subject Selection	23
4.2	Semi-structured Interviews	24
4.3	Data Analysis.....	26
5	Results and Discussion	27
5.1	The Current Position of Mestis	27
5.2	Main Development Points for Mestis	29
5.3	Mestis and Liiga	31
5.3.1	Sporting Competition and Possible Promotion	31
5.3.2	Increased Cooperation.....	32
6	Conclusions	35
6.1	A Development Model for Mestis	35
6.2	Reliability and Validity of the Study	38
6.3	Suggestions for Further Research	39
	References	40
	Appendices.....	45

1 Introduction

Despite the popularity of ice hockey in Finland, it can be argued that in these challenging financial times almost every hockey organization in Finland has been exploring ways to develop their operations, cost-efficiency, marketing, management strategies and appeal to the audience. The target organization of this development project is the Mestis Hockey League, the second highest competitive hockey league in Finland (see figure 1 for the official Mestis logo). Mestis is operated by Jääkiekon Sarjaseurat ry and functions under Suomen Jääkiekkoliitto (Finnish Ice Hockey Association). Despite some turbulent financial times in recent seasons, Mestis is still the second biggest sports league by spectator attendance in Finland behind the premier league Liiga.



Figure 1. The official logo of the Mestis Hockey League

In earlier years, there was a stronger competitive edge and rivalry between the highest leagues, Liiga and Mestis, and the chance to be promoted from Mestis to Liiga was always the base for all operations for the teams in Mestis. However in 2013, Liiga decided to end the promotion/demotion series between Liiga's worst team and the champion of Mestis, and announced their plan to expand Liiga to sixteen teams. In other words, they made the promotion from Mestis to Liiga possible, but only if the teams met their set criteria in the new license-based system (SuomiKiekko 2015).

This brings us to the current situation in Mestis. What now? Who is left? What to play for? Many questions were thrown in the air and are still up in the air. After the end of the promotion possibility, attendance dropped all around Mestis and protests were visible in many games and especially in the social media (Kaleva 2016). Mestis failed in their communication in those crucial times, and in 2013 and 2014 it seemed nobody knew what was going on and what was going to happen in the future.

Therefore the Mestis Hockey League as its own organization and as a hockey league in Finland is undergoing major changes. As Liiga made the decision to close off Liiga until 2018 so that no teams would be promoted from Mestis, Mestis has been forced to rethink its operating strategy to maintain interest in the league with spectators and consumers. Liiga has promised to provide financial assistance to Mestis on account of the closing of the premier league. Liiga has also, in cooperation with the Finnish Ice Hockey Association, launched a monetary bonus system for Mestis teams, including bonuses paid for the regular season winner, runner-up, third and fourth, and similar bonuses also provided in the play-offs (Jatkoaika 2015). Incentives such as these are typical in sports promotion (Schwarz, LaFleur & Hunter 2013, 244) and they can motivate Mestis teams and organizations to thrive for success but success in competitive sports also requires a well-functioning organization to begin with.

Finland truly needs a strong semi-professional hockey league alongside Liiga. Outside of the sixteen regions where Liiga is played, especially the young generation needs to see their favorite local players live and have authentic experiences of live hockey, even if it is not in the absolute top level in Finland (Haanpää 2016). This will help all the junior organizations to attract more young people to get involved in the sport of hockey, even as a hobby.

1.1 My Connection to the Study

This study into Mestis and its organization development is very much rooted in my own professional and personal interests in hockey and the development of hockey organizations. Having played hockey professionally for 17 years (Elite Prospects 2017), I was lucky enough to play in many different countries and for many different organizations and leagues, which allowed me to develop a unique perspective to how hockey is played, managed and organized around the world.

Even before my professional career, when I attended Clarkson University in the United States, I was able to combine my interests in hockey and business and management as I played competitive university hockey for four years while completing my B.Sc. degree in Marketing. That experience was already very valuable for me as a professional and also provided great groundwork for the Master's degree in Sport Development and Management I am completing at the moment.

As mentioned, I have experience of playing and working for various hockey organizations, from the National Hockey League and American Hockey League in the US and Canada to the Finnish SM-Liiga, and to Swiss and Italian leagues later in my career. I finished my hockey career in Finland playing in Mestis in the 2011-2012 season and after that I have been working in coaching in Mestis, then Division II and again in Mestis where I am currently the head coach of Peliitat Heinola (later Peliitat).

Therefore it could be said that my connection with Mestis, which began in 2010-2011 with KooKoo Kouvola as a player, continued in 2011-2012 in Kiekko-Vantaa as a player and allowed me to transition into coaching in 2012-2013 as an assistant coach in Kiekko-Vantaa, has allowed a unique perspective into the Mestis Hockey League and its organizational structure, operations, personnel and functionality. In 2011-2012 with KooKoo I was already working for the organization in their marketing and sales operations while playing full time, and with Kiekko-Vantaa, the assistant coach and team manager positions allowed another in-depth view into the day-to-day activities, realities and challenges of a Mestis organization and the league as a whole.

The last two years with Peliitat, first as an assistant coach and in this current season as head coach (see figure 2) have also put me in direct contact with various Mestis stakeholders, from the league and organizational levels to the players, personnel and fans. I have noticed many elements of the Mestis league that could be improved and developed to ensure the attractiveness of the league and its organizations and teams.



Figure 2. Me as the head coach for Peliitat Heinola (photo credit Jatkoaika.com)

In my opinion, it is essential for Mestis to develop into a more competitive direction and not take its position in Finnish hockey for granted. This interest in the condition and appeal of Mestis has been the driving force for this study into how Mestis could develop into a stronger and more effective hockey organization to match the dedication and drive seen in the many Mestis teams and organizations around Finland.

Therefore this development project concentrates on rebuilding the brand of Mestis as a league that offers an option for the consumer who appreciates values like real sportsmanship, locality, honesty and openness. I strongly feel that there are many fans and sponsors who would like to be involved in these kind of organizations.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the current situation of the Mestis Hockey League and its organizations and discover how key stakeholder groups such as Mestis organization chairs, players, personnel and fans see Mestis in its current form and how they would like to see Mestis develop. The study is approached from both a personal perspective and data acquired through semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders from various Mestis organizations.

The premise of this research has value because little research has been performed about hockey organizations in Finland, and particularly from a development viewpoint. Most sport research with Finnish hockey has been performed on sport injuries, coaching, individual player development and the analysis of various hockey-related qualities (The National Sport Research Database 2017) but the development of hockey leagues in Finland and abroad has typically taken place 'in the cabinets', not through sport development or management research (Leadley & Zygmunt 2006, 91).

However, it is important to approach the development of Finnish hockey also through the various stakeholders who are involved in the day-to-day activities with the teams and organizations (Burnett 2011, 263), and not only through associations and through administrative personnel who may hold the power but may be estranged from the realities of Finnish hockey and the challenges many teams and organizations face (cf. Tuuna 2016).

1.3 Research Questions

This qualitative study from the field of sport development and management has been approached with the help of four main research questions. The questions have allowed for the exploration of the topic from a general perspective and through data collected from semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in Mestis. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. What is the current situation of Mestis as perceived by the study participants?
2. What are the main concerns regarding Mestis as perceived by the study participants?
3. How would the study participants like to see Mestis develop?
4. What is the role with Mestis and Liiga, and how should it develop?

2 Mestis as a Hockey League

The Mestis Hockey League (officially Jääkiekon Sarjaseurat ry) is the championship league of the Finnish Ice Hockey Federation (Suomen Jääkiekkoliitto) and the second highest ice hockey league in Finland behind the premier league Liiga. Mestis was founded in 2000 to replace the so-called First Division when the then SM-Liiga was temporarily closed for competition (Mestis 2017).

While Mestis and its predecessors have long and established histories in Finnish ice hockey, in recent years Mestis has suffered several setbacks that have challenged its position and credibility. In 2013-2014 the possibility of being promoted from Mestis to Liiga was eliminated and Liiga effectively closed off for competition. Since then, however, three of the largest Mestis teams, Sport Vaasa, KooKoo Kouvola and Jukurit Mikkeli were raised to Liiga through various deals and payments. (Kössö 2016; Liiga 2015.) After these developments the Liiga was closed off again so that in the current 2016-2017 season Mestis teams have no chance of being promoted to Liiga even after winning the Mestis championship.

Currently there are 13 teams competing in Mestis, representing different areas of Finland. The demand for the product and experience provided by Mestis is located quite evenly throughout Finland, and teams playing away games in various parts of Finland during the Mestis season can be considered to also promote visibility.

To increase further visibility, Mestis operates quite actively online and in social media through their:

- website (<http://www.mestis.fi>),
- Facebook page (<https://fi-fi.facebook.com/MestisHockey>),
- Twitter account (<https://twitter.com/mestis>),
- Instagram account (<https://www.instagram.com/mestisfi/>) and
- YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3kRTwrN_rUe2SYEKjuKl4g).

While the Liiga hockey teams pose competition by playing at a higher level of hockey in Finland and therefore enjoy more visibility, sponsorship, media exposure and arguably a larger fan base, the Mestis organizations and hockey teams are focused on local effectiveness, and one of the main strengths of the organizations is the very cost-effective operation based on the volunteer participation and work input of the company staff and organization members. The 13 Mestis organizations around Finland can be seen from figure 3.



Figure 3. Mestis teams located in Finland in season 2016-2017

2.1 Organizations and Teams in Mestis

The current 13 Mestis organizations, teams and locations are listed in table 1 in alphabetical order.

Table 1. Mestis organizations in 2016-2017

Organization	Mestis hockey team	Location
Edustus Hermes ry	Hermes	Kokkola
Espoo United Oy	Espoo United	Espoo
Heinolan Peliitat Oy	Peliitat	Heinola
Iisalmen Peli-Karhut ry	Iisalmen Peli-Karhut	Iisalmi
D Team Jyväskylä Oy	JYP-Akatemia	Jyväskylä
Kajaanin Edustushokki ry	Hokki	Kajaani
KeuPa Hockey Oy	KeuPa HT	Keuruu
Kiekko-Vantaa Hockey Oy	Kiekko-Vantaa	Vantaa
LeKi Hockey Oy	LeKi	Lempäälä
Mehdimäki Oy	Jokipojat	Joensuu
RoKi Hockey Oy	RoKi	Rovaniemi
Savonlinnan Pallokerho Oy	SapKo	Savonlinna
TUTO Hockey Oy	TUTO Hockey	Turku

As can be seen in table 1, the Mestis organizations are either registered associations (ry) or limited companies (Oy). Of the 13 organizations 11 are the sole ice hockey representative in their respective regions. Only TUTO Hockey in Turku and JYP-Akatemia in Jyväskylä are the so-called second team in their cities with TPS Turku and JYP Jyväskylä playing in Liiga. In all the other areas the Mestis organization is the main ice hockey representative, even though with most locations there are Liiga teams situated quite close, such as Sport Vaasa close to Hermes, Pelicans Lahti close to Peliitat, KalPa Kuopio close to Iisalmen Peli-Karhut, and so on. Also the two metropolitan Mestis teams, Espoo United and Kiekko-Vantaa, can be seen to compete with the Liiga team HIFK Helsinki.

For these local organizations to develop and thrive, Mestis must be able to maintain and develop its premium position among the inhabitants and consumers in many areas of Finland, and through the quality of the operations and the success of the hockey teams be a source of pride for the communities. This can be accomplished through efforts to increase visibility and highlighting the values of the league and the organizations through the product, the Mestis Hockey League.

2.2 Administration

The main personnel operating Mestis are Tuomas Haanpää, the Chairman of the board of Jääkiekon Sarjaseurat ry, Pirkka Antila, the Hockey Operations Manager of the Finnish Ice Hockey Association, and Iiro Junnila, in charge of Mestis communications (Mestis 2017).

The Mestis league specifies the requirements and operations for each Mestis team in the Mestis manual (2015), which is not published openly to the public but will be referred to in this thesis. The manual provides guidelines for all organizations regarding the administration, marketing and sales, finances, facilities and conditions, the team, game events, youth activity, insurance information, disciplinary rules and media guide.

According to the manual (2015), all Mestis teams must have a board of directors, with the Chairman of the board primarily responsible for the organization's finances together with the CEO and/or Director of Hockey. The CEO is also in charge of all the affairs related to the hockey team and playing, including the player licenses and player transfers.

All Mestis teams should also have a Marketing Manager who will devise the organization's marketing plan together with the CEO, and will also recruit and acquire new financial partnerships and sales for the organization. Overall organization finances are handled either by a Financial Manager or an accounting office, depending on the organization size and resources.

The Mestis manual (2015) also states that Mestis organizations should have a press officer in charge of all press conferences, press releases and media contacts locally and nationally. This person can also be in charge of Internet operations, including maintaining the team website, posting information and keeping relevant information on the website up-to-date.

The organizations and teams that operate in Mestis must also meet the requirements for the Mestis license provided by the Finnish Ice Hockey Association. While the precise license requirements are not public information, the terms which must be met include:

- financial indicators and balance sheet,
- business transactions and turnover,
- team youth organization and cooperation with the main team,

- operating conditions and their development,
- business plan,
- team organization and resources, and
- other team-specific elements

(Suomen Jääkiekkoliitto 2015).

2.3 Marketing, Sales and Finance

The primary sponsorship partners of the Mestis league can be seen in figure 4 below. In addition to the league-wide sponsors, each Mestis organization also has its own sponsors and financial support systems. The Mestis league recommends all organizations to raise funds in a variety of ways, including ticket sales, corporate tickets, season tickets, box sales, advertising sales, profits from various publications, profits from concession sales (restaurants and kiosks), fan merchandise sales, raffle sales and event sales (Mestis 2015).



Figure 4. Primary sponsorship partners of Mestis

Marketing ends up making some 30 % to 60 % of the Mestis team budget income (Mestis 2015) and each organization's marketing plan should include itemized areas of marketing income, such as hockey rink side advertisements, hockey rink ice advertisement, lighting ads, screen ads, sound ads, internet ads, jersey ads, etc. Figure 5 illustrates an example of hockey rink and arena advertising with the Mestis organization Peliitat.



Figure 5. Hockey rink and arena advertising with Peliitat

Advertising for the Mestis organization products and merchandise is primarily handled through Internet websites, social media, print advertising, outdoor advertising and word-of-mouth communication, all methods found to be typically effective in sports marketing and promotion (Schwarz et al. 2013, 268). With many Mestis teams, local newspaper advertising and word-of-mouth have been found to be especially effective.

Box sales are also considered an important part of maintaining the enjoyment and comfort level of sponsors, partners and companies. Box sales and services are a chance for Mestis organizations to portray professional quality in their operations and customer service, as well as introduce the team and organization to current and new partners and sponsors (Mestis 2015). VIP areas are also a possibility but because of the relatively small size of most Mestis hockey arenas, only a few have VIP areas and their size and service often do not match the equivalent areas in Liiga arenas or other more high-end sports facilities in Finland.

The main items as the sales products of many Mestis organizations are partnership contracts, home game events and merchandise sales. The key product from a marketing perspective remains also the visibility provided for the partners and the home game event itself where the main partners have been strongly involved and visible. The role of merchandise could also increase in the future as the high quality and stylish accessories and other fan apparel will play a significant role in increasingly the visibility of the Mestis hockey teams and therefore they will introduce the teams, their logos and the brands more

strongly into people's minds and interactions. Figure 6 below demonstrate a selection of current team merchandise with the Mestis organization Peliitat.

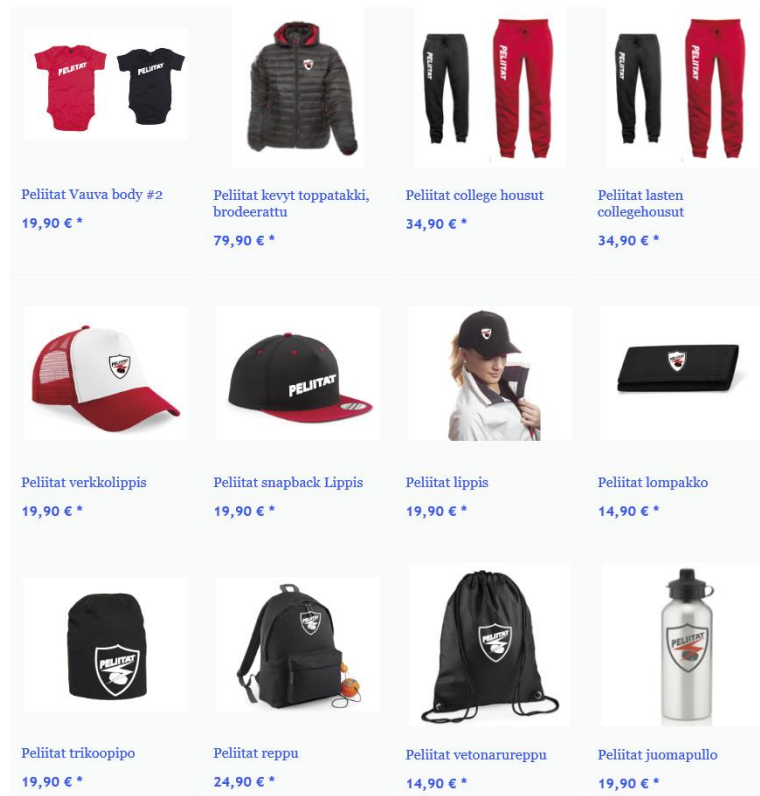


Figure 6. A selection of team merchandise with Peliitat

The pricing of any Mestis products in times of financial turmoil must be kept reasonable. While pricing strategies within sports marketing include determining the pricing goals, determining the market sensitivity to the price, estimating the cost-volume-profit relationship and determining the pricing strategies of major competitors (Shilbury et al. 2009, 108-118), in its market segment the Mestis league must be able to provide an affordable product for the customers. The main product for the consumers/supporters/customers should remain a reasonably priced ticket to a home game, providing an inexpensive alternative for people's leisure-time activities and the price-quality ratio will need to remain consistent particularly compared to the regional Liiga rivals.

2.4 Case: Peliitat Heinola

As a case example of one Mestis organization and hockey team, I would like to introduce how Peliitat Heinola (Peliitat) function as a member of the Mestis league. As mentioned

earlier, I have been involved with Peliitat for two seasons now, in 2015-2016 as a coach and in the current 2016-2017 season as the head coach. My experience with Peliitat and around Mestis provided me the interest for this study and has given me a unique insight into one Mestis organization. The main details of a Mestis organization, as described in the previous subchapters, are summarized in table 2 below with regard to Peliitat.

Table 2. Peliitat Heinola as a Mestis organization



Organization	Heinolan Peliitat Oy
Team name	Peliitat
Location	Heinola
Size of region	c. 20,000 inhabitants
Arena	Versowood Areena, Urheilukatu 2, 18100 Heinola
Liiga cooperation	Pelicans Lahti
Suomi-Sarja cooperation	Titaanit Kotka
Board of directors	Marko Kaijansinkko, Petri Liikanen, Marko Nyman, Jussi Mattila, Karri Rämö, Pasi Nurminen
Chairman of the board	Jussi Varjo
Chief Executive Officer	Josse Mielonen
Director of Hockey	Pekka Saittakari
Team director	Marko Nyman
Head coach	Marko Tuomainen
Assistant coaches	Jani Keinänen, Santeri Heiskanen, Santeri Matikainen
Marketing Manager	Jussi Mattila
Press officer	Toni Hakulinen
Team photographer	Kiia Aha
Head of security	Jukka Hakulinen
Social media outlets	www.peliitat.fi https://www.facebook.com/peliitat https://twitter.com/peliitat1969 https://www.instagram.com/peliitat/ https://www.youtube.com/user/HeinolanPeliitat Snapchat: peliitat
Turnover 2016-2017	425,000 €
Main sponsors	City of Heinola, Bauer, Versowood, Elenia, Marakon, TKP, Ravintola Maisteri, Mediatalo Esa, Heinolan Talohuolto Oy, Urheilu-Kontti, Wiitta

As can be seen from table 2, Peliitat operates as quite a typical mid-sized Mestis organization which primarily serves the Heinola region in the Päijät-Häme area of Finland. Its administration is coherent with the Mestis guidelines and it works in close cooperation with the neighboring Liiga team Pelicans Lahti, with several members of the board working for both organizations. Peliitat also has a cooperation deal with the Suomi-Sarja level team Titaanit Kotka, which allows fluent player transfers and loans between the organizations.

Similarly with many other Mestis organizations, Peliitat also relies heavily on part-time employees and volunteers to help run the organization's daily activities and the home game events, which poses its challenges but also creates a strong community spirit among the organization and team. The strong locality also shows in the sponsors Peliitat has been able to obtain so that from the 11 main sponsors all but one are local companies or organizations and Peliitat also has further 22 local companies as partners and another 70 local companies offering financial support (Peliitat 2017).

Still, the amount of turnover per season remains quite moderate at 425,000 euros and it is a far cry from the budgets of, say TUTO Turku, whose turnover in the fiscal year 2016 was 906,000 euros (Jussila 2016). However, Peliitat are determined to continue their development and growth both as a competitive hockey team and a Mestis organization who aims for both sporting success and financial growth.

3 Developing a Sport Organization

Sport organizations are unique in many respects because they operate both as businesses and as sport teams. This poses various challenges to how a sport organization can be developed, what is the focus of the development, who can decide on the change or development and who implements it.

3.1 Key Elements of Sport Organizations

Mullin (1985, 106) has listed five special characteristics of sport organizations, related to sport development, management and marketing: the market, the product, the price, the promotion and the sport distribution system. A similar list of sport-related 5Ps (product, price, place, people, promotion) has been mentioned by Mullin, Hardy and Sutton (2014, 46-47), Shilbury et al. (2009, 6-8) and Watt (2003, 169-170) but in this section I will expand on Mullin's original five, with a particular focus on hockey organizations and Mestis organizations.

First of all, the **market** for sport products and services can be considered unique because sport organizations both compete and cooperate with each other. This dual role can be considered both a challenge and an opportunity for sport organizations and recognizing both the competition and the cooperation can be one element of developing an organization. This can be seen also in the context of this study since all Mestis league organizations are competing for the sporting success and in some areas of Finland also competing for the same fans and consumers. On the other hand, all Mestis organizations also cooperate with each other under the umbrella of the Mestis Hockey League so they operate under the same guidelines and basic functions.

Another one of Mullin's (1985) characteristics is the sport **product** which does not always function as many other products in the world of business. Instead, the sport product can be quite intangible and subjective and even unpredictable, which creates challenges for organizations. For instance, the sport product can be the team, the merchandise and the home game event, which are quite tangible and purchasable products, but it can also be the support, the environment or the fan perceptions of the team and the organizations, which are more implicit and intangible products (Smith & Stewart 2015, 114).

Price is also a special characteristic with sport organizations because traditionally in sports the price paid by the consumer is relatively small compared to the actual costs of providing the sport product or experience (Mullin 1985, 106). In general, pricing should depend of cost, competition, demand, or a combination of all three, and to determine the optimal price for the product, an organization must consider the goals of the organization, price sensitivity of the markets, demand/supply issues, pricing strategies of competitors, legal/ethical constraints, marketing mix constraints and time dependence (Shilbury et al. 2009, 121). However, because in sport the price is often determined by what the consumer is willing to pay, not what the actual costs are for the organization, this puts added pressure for sport organizations to have both sporting success which will appeal to consumers, and sound financial planning that will allow a quality product but with a reasonable price for the consumers.

This is true also with the Mestis league and its organizations because the price of the products (e.g. home game tickets, merchandise, televised games and concession sales) must be reasonable in the relatively small economic areas where Mestis teams operate. On the other hand, the organizations have to have enough outside financing, sales and sponsorship that they can compete effectively in the league and provide a chance to develop the organization through the financial and the sporting success.

This is also very much connected to Mullin's fourth element, the **promotion** of sport. Unlike many companies in traditional fields of industry or commerce, sport organizations do not have to actively promote themselves because they already enjoy wide exposure because of history and/or status in the community. Therefore, because organizations know they have a relatively 'safe' position in the market, there may be a sense of complacency about promotional efforts (Irwin, Sutton & McCarthy 2008, 14).

This may be truer with larger sport organizations who, because of a few very large-scale sponsors, do not need to acquire new sponsors or partners, but with Mestis most teams and organizations do promote their visibility and the team quite actively in an effort to acquire more outside financing to help with the organization growth. After all, in Finland businesses often want to be associated with sport, hockey in particular, and to show support for the local sport organization either in large or smaller scale (Pusa 2013). Further, it is generally known that the amount of money and resources available for sports organizations is directly connected to the amount of exposure and media coverage the league, team or organization receives (Hoye, Smith, Westerbeek, Stewart & Nicholson 2006, 56).

The final element of the special characteristics in Mullin's (1985) category is the **sport distribution system** which again is different from many other fields. In sport, the distribution of the product is usually restricted to one location (Baker & Esherick 2013, 135), in the case of hockey, usually the team's home ice rink or arena. This means the quality of the location is extremely important to the sport organization as it affects the visibility of the organization, the perception, the sales and the customer experience.

In the Mestis setting, for instance, the arenas of the Mestis teams have to be comfortable and inviting because the retail of tickets, season tickets, merchandise and other sales often take place in the arena during or between home games. Therefore Mestis as a league and all the individual organizations should invest in the development of their arenas to increase the quality, comfort and accessibility of the facilities. This could also lead to increased exposure, sales and customer satisfaction, all essential elements in the success of any organization, in sport or otherwise.

3.2 The Development Process

For sport organizations to develop, they need to strategically consider their goals to improve the current situation. Hoyer et al. (2006, 73-75) have itemized a process for strategic management for sport organizations which includes a strategy analysis, direction, development, implementation and evaluation. A similar structure can be seen in this thesis with the suggestion for Mestis to develop its organization through analysis, vision, strategic options and suggestions for deployment of the development model.

Several sources in the field of sport management and marketing (e.g. Mullin et al. 2014, 33-35; Thibault & Quarterman 2011, 84; Blann & Armstrong 2011, 253) have also listed a process that sport organizations must undertake to develop their function to the next level. These steps are:

1. Develop the vision, position and purpose of the sport organization,
2. Develop strategic goals and objectives,
3. Develop a marketing, sales and service plan,
4. Integrate the marketing plan into a broader, strategic resource allocation, and
5. Control and evaluate the implementation.

These items have also been a part of this study's research questions and the questions posed to the interview participants so that the development model proposed for Mestis in this study will be as comprehensive and effective as possible. For this study it was also important to obtain answers and views from as many different Mestis stakeholders as possible for the development model to be successful.

After all, the strength of a sport organization can be said to lie on the commitment of the individuals connected to the organization (Watt 2003, 57). Therefore for the Mestis Hockey League to develop, it must create a stronger connection to its member organizations by allowing a stronger competitive impetus through re-installing the possibility of Liiga promotion. When there is no chance to rise to a higher sporting level through competition, the purpose of Mestis has been reduced to an amateur league of teams who essentially are playing "for fun".

However, instigating change in sport is not always easy. It includes knowing who makes the change, can the change be made internally or are other parties involved, and where the power to make the change actually is (Watt 2003, 161). Leadership is another integral part of sport organizations such as Mestis so that leaders need to be able to convince others of their visions and cooperate effectively with the leaders of other organizations (Hoye et al. 2006, 10). This also applies to Mestis where the Mestis leadership should be in closer strategic connection with the Liiga leadership to develop both leagues and all the organizations that operate under both leagues.

For Mestis to develop, the league and its organizations also need to avoid the pitfalls of many sport organizations as described by Mullin et al. (2014, 13-15). Many sport organizations can misjudge their operations and for instance confuse promotion and marketing, settle for poor sales and service, conduct poor-quality research to analyze their needs and fail to adapt to industry, market, and consumer change. Therefore one of the main focuses of Mestis in its development has to be identifying customer needs so that the quality and appeal of the league and its team will continue to improve.

3.3 Appealing to the Customer

Another element that makes sport unique is the role of consumer involvement and the unpredictability of consumer behavior as the consumer connection to the sport can vary quite easily and because of emotional and psychological factors. Sport consumers also often consider themselves experts which poses higher expectations for the sport organizations (Mullin et al. 2014, 20-21; Shilbury et al. 2009, 8-9).

For organizations to appeal to customers, consumers, clients and other stakeholders, they must also recognize how sport consumers have various levels of attachment to the organization, sport or team, and a successful organization must be able to appeal to all customer segments. Funk and James (2001) and Shilbury et al. (2009, 181) have identified a sport consumer behavior model, also called the psychological continuum model where sport consumers can be divided into the segments described in figure 7.

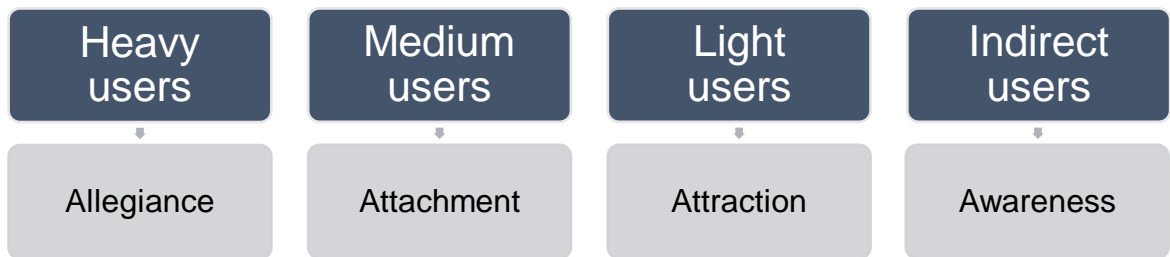


Figure 7. Sport consumer psychological continuum model (Shilbury et al. 2009, 181)

In this continuum the **heavy users** of a sport team or organization are characterized by their strong commitment and even allegiance to the team. These consumers invest heavily in the organization, both emotionally and financially, and are eager to purchase any product or experience the organization has to offer.

Following the heavy users are perhaps the most common sport consumers, the **medium users** who show an attachment to their supported organization and who are also willing to invest financially and emotionally in the team and organization. In terms of organization development and sport marketing, it could be argued that this consumer segment is the one who most want the organization to develop and their wishes and needs should be examined closely. The medium users have a commitment to the organization but they also want high-quality products and experiences that provide value for money so increasing this segment or its financial investment in the organization can yield a good profit for the sport organization.

The third customer segment, the **light users**, can be a diverse group of consumers, many of whom probably are connected with various sports, organizations and teams so that their commitment is not directed to one organization but many. This attraction to the organization is also valuable but with effective development organizations could get their light users more connected and committed to one specific team or organization. After all, high customer retention rates are very beneficial for sport organizations as they provide both long-term and short-term value (Gray & Wert-Gray 2012, 276).

For an organization to develop effectively, they also need to consider the fourth sport consumer segment, the **indirect users** who have awareness of the team, organization or sport but are not entirely connected to the team. If an organization or league, such as Mestis, increases its overall visibility, this allows the indirect users to be more connected to the team or organization and perhaps with time develop into light users.

3.4 Mestis SWOT Analysis

When analyzing any organization, business or target, the SWOT analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats is a useful tool to determine the potential of the proposed task or project. According to Blakey (2011, 28-29), the purpose of the SWOT analysis for sport organizations is to analyze:

- what the sport organization does well and needs to improve,
- where the sport organization has competition which can be defended,
- where the sport organization needs to protect itself from outside influences, and
- where the sport organization needs to focus on its priorities.

While most SWOT analyses are performed by the organizations themselves, the purpose of this analysis for the Mestis Hockey League is to illustrate how the analysis distinguishes key elements in the Mestis organizations to be developed as part of the overall development model proposed by the results of this study. Arguably, if the analysis were performed by the Mestis administration or other key personnel, it would appear different from the one created here from the perspective of a Mestis organization operative (myself), for the purpose of developing the entire hockey league. Figure 8 below as a summary presents the results of the SWOT analysis regarding the Mestis Hockey League.

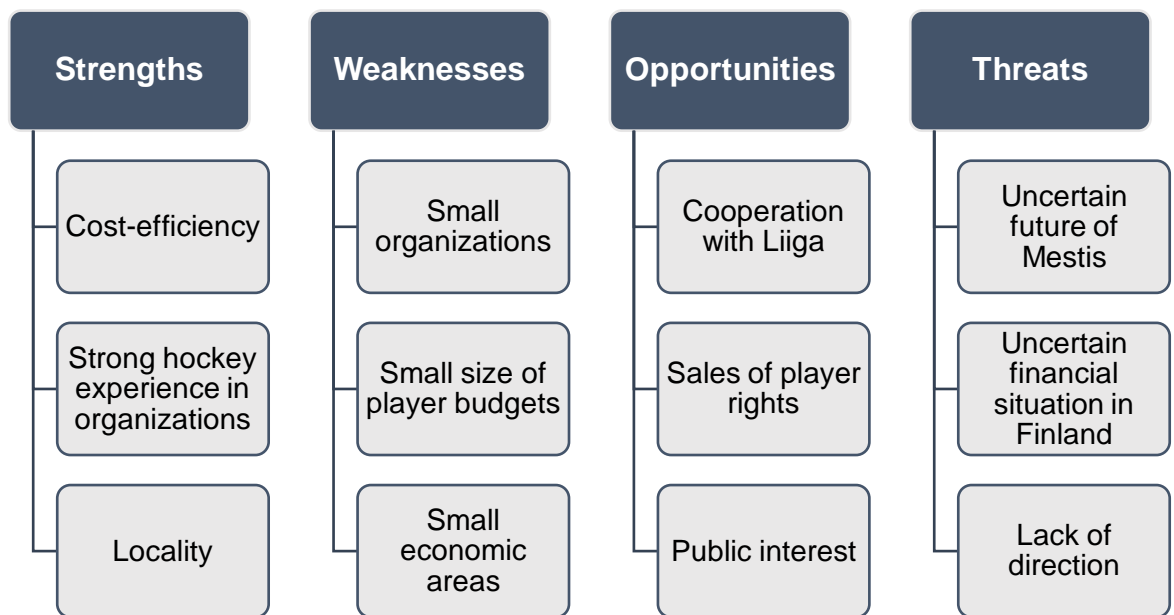


Figure 8. SWOT analysis for Mestis

As can be seen from the **strengths** and from chapters 2 and 3 so far, Mestis can operate in quite a cost-effective manner with a well-established operation and teams that are mostly dedicated to the league. Mestis and its predecessors already have a long history in Finnish hockey so the league can depend on a certain level of recognition and rely on the professional quality and strong hockey experience in the different organizations operating in Mestis. Another strength can be considered to be the strong ties the organizations have to their local areas around Finland. In many cases the Mestis team is the main sport attraction the in the area and therefore enjoys visibility and support from the local community and businesses (Mestis 2015).

In terms of **weaknesses**, the small size of the business areas and the small size of the organizations can in turn be considered a downside as the limited resources and small organizations do not provide many opportunities for the growth of the league. Mestis as a league cannot dream of the same kind of revenue and exposure as Liiga because the operation as a whole is much smaller in scale. The limited resources also show in the player budgets so that very high-profile players are not attracted to play in Mestis if they can obtain higher salaries elsewhere in Finland or outside of Finland (Ziemann 2013).

One the main **opportunities** for Mestis is the increased cooperation with Liiga. For this to happen, both leagues must agree on the conditions for Mestis teams to compete for promotion to Liiga. This is a vital part of the existence of Mestis and a vital part of Finnish competitive hockey. Opening Liiga to promotion from Mestis will have also other positive effects, such as increased visibility, increased competitiveness, increased player movement between Mestis and Liiga and increased public interest in Mestis teams and the promotion stage and games (Sirkkiä-Jarva 2016). Decisions about Finnish hockey cannot be made solely based on finances and protecting the finances of Liiga teams against potential demotion to Mestis. Instead, the increased cooperation will benefit both leagues and Finnish hockey in general.

Otherwise the **threats** to Mestis in the SWOT analysis will be realized. The future of Mestis at the moment is uncertain because organizations, teams, personnel and players are unsure what the upcoming seasons will entail. Admittedly, also the general financial situation in Finland needs to improve so that Mestis will benefit from consumers' interest in sport entertainment but at the same time Mestis needs clear direction and drive so that it will continue to develop both competitively and financially.

4 Materials and Methods

This study relies on qualitative research methods and materials to determine the current situation of the Mestis hockey league and its future, as perceived by participants from various Mestis organizations. Qualitative research is common in the field of sport management as it allows researchers to understand, explore and discover issues related to various aspects of sports (Skinner, Edwards & Corbett 2015, 17). Qualitative research uses the natural setting as the source of data, there are often human subjects involved in the study and the researcher aims at discovering the meaning related individuals have for a particular topic (Edwards & Skinner 2009, 49-50). Semi-structured interviews, such as the ones conducted in this study, are also a popular method of research in sport management and marketing (Edwards & Skinner 2009, 107; Skinner et al. 2015, 55).

4.1 Subject Selection

Because this study focuses on Mestis stakeholders' perceptions of the league, its current situation and its future, I invited different stakeholders from different Mestis organizations to participate in individual semi-structured interviews. In sport management research, in-depth interviews offer cost efficiency and deeper insights (Mullin et al. 2014, 98-99). To examine the perceptions of key Mestis stakeholders, purposeful sampling was used where the researcher intentionally selects individuals who can provide relevant information on the key concepts of the study (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011, 173). Purposeful sampling schemes emphasize in-depth understanding and so called information-rich cases to gain maximum variation in the perceptions of the studied subject (Edwards & Skinner 2009, 67; Patton 2002, 46).

From the 13 emails in January 2016 sent to all 13 Mestis organizations, I received 10 positive responses. As many of the respondents were busy with the end of the 2015-2016 Mestis season, the upcoming end-of-season meeting with all Mestis organizations on April 29-30, 2016 was considered the best and most time-efficient way to reach all the interview participants face-to-face. The 10 interview participants are described in more detail but anonymously in table 3.

Table 3. Interview participants (N=10)

No.	Position in Mestis	Gender	Age	Interview date	Interview duration
1	Player	Male	23	April 29, 2016	15 min.
2	Secretary	Female	25	April 29, 2016	21 min.
3	Press officer	Male	27	April 29, 2016	18 min.
4	Head coach	Male	44	April 29, 2016	25 min.
5	Chairman of the board	Male	37	April 29, 2016	22 min.
6	CEO	Male	40	April 30, 2016	16 min.
7	Chairman/CEO	Male	55	April 30, 2016	20 min.
8	Team manager	Male	39	April 30, 2016	25 min.
9	CEO	Male	52	April 30, 2016	29 min.
10	Fan	Female	29	April 30, 2016	14 min.

In qualitative research, relatively small samples such as these are quite common because the sample size is tied to the research aims, questions and design, such as in this study. However, even with the small sample size, the participant details show variety in the stakeholder qualities and therefore it can be argued that the participants demonstrate a relevant cross-section of Mestis stakeholders for the purpose of this study.

4.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Before the interviews, the participants (N=10) were asked to complete an informed consent form (Appendix 1). This was to facilitate the ethical implementation of the interviews and the participants' right to self-determination (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011, 64; Kvale & Brinkmann 2009, 70-71; Sieber & Tolich 2013, 115). The form explained the study, emphasized that participation in the interviews was voluntary and confidential, and that participants could cancel or withdraw from the interview at any point if they wished.

As mentioned in subchapter 4.1, all interviews were conducted on April 29 or April 30, 2016 during the 2015-2016 Mestis end-of-season meeting. The time and location were selected and agreed with the participants to ensure a convenient place to meet which was also central and as easily accessible as possible (King & Horrocks 2010, 42-44; Warren & Karner 2005, 132). Figure 9 illustrates myself and one of the vice-captains of my team Peliitat, Christian Silfver, being interviewed during the 2015-2016 Mestis end-of-season meeting.



Figure 9. View from the 2015-2016 Mestis end-of-season meeting (photo credit Peliitat.fi)

Each interview process followed the general principles for semi-structured interviews as described by Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2011, 66-67) and Skinner et al. (2015, 56-57). This included the use of specific questions prepared in advance (Appendix 2). It was also important to follow good interview procedure, such as engage in empathic listening and use neutral, open-ended questions to elicit more responses to allow the participant to elaborate his/her views on the topics under discussion. Each interview was also approached with a neutral, unprejudiced and unbiased attitude so that good rapport with each interviewee could be maintained, which is often considered essential to the success of research interviews (King & Horrocks 2010, 48; Loosveldt 2008, 215).

All the interviews were conducted in Finnish, audiotaped and then transcribed in Finnish. This process was to capture the participants' reflection in their own words and language and to ensure the accuracy of the data for analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009, 179-179). The transcripts ranged from 3 pages to 12 pages. The interview transcripts were later translated into English by myself so that relevant quotations could be used in the study results.

4.3 Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the interview transcripts were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti, with topic coding with tags and labels within the data and followed by axial coding (Richards 2005, 87-88). This meant the codes could be grouped into larger categories for themes and patterns related to the current situation of the Mestis Hockey League, the challenges of Mestis at the moment, the perceived development points of Mestis, and the perceptions of the cooperation with Mestis and Liiga now and in the future.

The processing and analysis of all the data were approached throughout the study with conscious minimization of researcher subjectivity and bias (Creswell 2014, 190-193). The phases, procedures and products of data collection and analysis for this qualitative research are itemized below in figure 10.

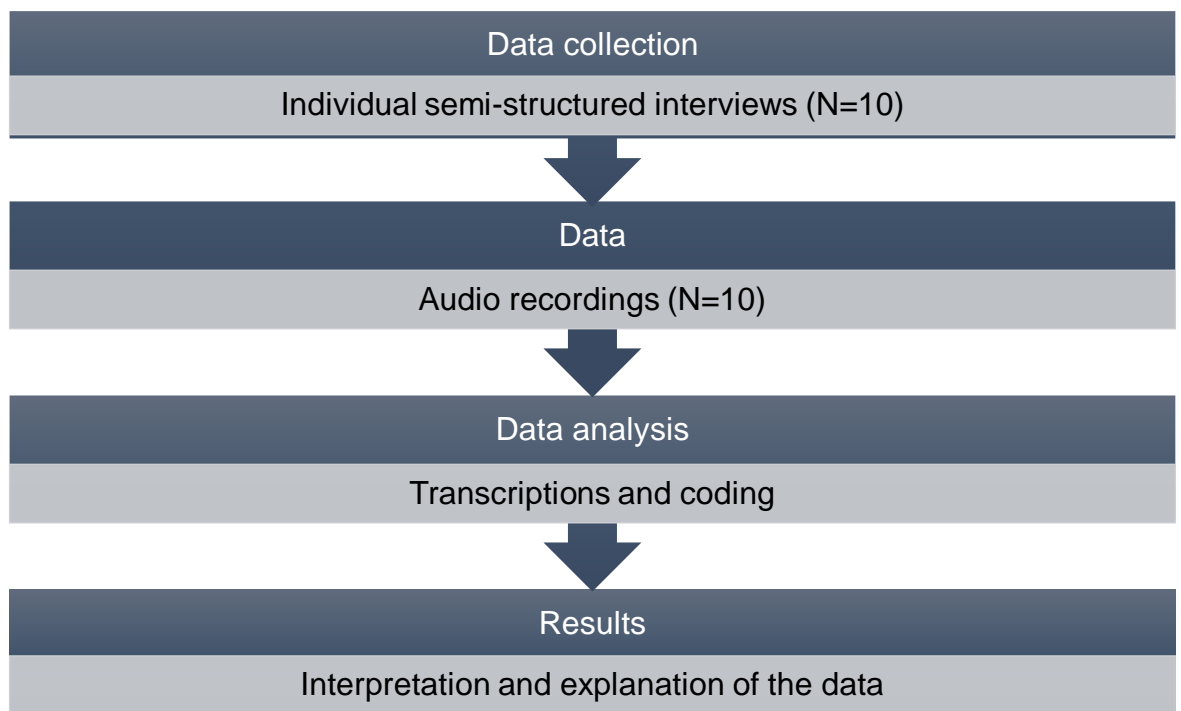


Figure 10. The data collection process

5 Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the results of the study, as analyzed through the semi-structured interview transcripts (N=10) (see Appendix 2). As mentioned in subchapter 4.2, the ten interview participants represent various Mestis stakeholder groups from fans and players to organization CEOs and chairs. Relevant quotations from the transcripts are used to illustrate the arguments and the interview participants are identified only with P for participant and the number 1-10 (e.g. P1).

5.1 The Current Position of Mestis

In the first interview question, the current position of Mestis, i.e. the second highest hockey league in Finland, with 13 teams competing for the championship but with no chance of competing for promotion to Liiga (see chapter 2) was seen by most of the interview participants (n=7) to be an unfavorable position. Seven of the participants signaled in the interview data that they were not pleased with the current position of Mestis, for the following reasons:

- Concerns about the financial situation of Mestis (n=3)
- Overall room for improvement (n=2)
- Too strong ties to Liiga (n=1)
- Audiences losing interest in Mestis (n=1).

As discussed in chapters 2 and 3 of this study, Mestis as a league and the organizations in it operate in relatively small economic areas and often on a part-time or volunteer basis so the financial impact of Mestis is a continuous challenge. This combined with the overall economic challenges in Finland have meant that Mestis and its organizations face constant financial pressure. Mestis also has a history of losing teams to bankruptcy, such as Kiekko-Laser from Oulu in the middle of the 2011-2012 season (Wilenius 2011). Therefore the economic issues and uncertainty continue to plague Mestis and its organizations and this can be seen from the various stakeholders (n=7).

Two interview participants (n=2) spoke only generally about wanting to see improvement in Mestis in the first question but specified their position and reasons later in the interviews. However, other individual mentions about the position of Mestis were that Mestis was too strongly tied to Liiga and that audiences were losing interest in Mestis (both n=1). With the first perception, the participant (P2) was concerned about the stronghold Liiga has on the development of Mestis. While it could be beneficial in some respects, the ties to Liiga were also seen as a hindrance and some Mestis organizations are perhaps controlled too strongly by their Liiga cooperation team, including player transfers or player loans. In addition, some Mestis organizations have board members who are also part of the Liiga cooperation team board (see chapter 2.2) so this can be a cause of conflict and control.

The final specific mention about the current situation of Mestis can be considered a major cause for concern: audiences losing interest in Mestis. This has been a growing development in Mestis ever since 2013 when Liiga was closed off for promotion from Mestis and subsequently three of the largest Mestis organizations, Sport, Jukurit and KooKoo, were raised to Liiga with cabinet decisions and license payments (Kössö 2016; Liiga 2015). That inevitably meant that audiences generally in Finland and specifically in Mestis regions were beginning to lose interest in a league that had no true competition through the promotion possibility. Therefore, this element can be seen as one of the main hindrances to the development of Mestis.

However, three of the ten interview participants were not displeased with the current position of Mestis with answers such as:

- *“happy in relation to the current conditions”* (P5),
- *“pleased with the current position”* (P8), and
- *“with the ‘farm team’ aspect, yes”* (P10).

The last comment relates to the position of many Mestis teams as the so-called ‘farm team’ of a nearby Liiga team, as discussed in chapter 2.1. The benefit was seen in the player transitions between the Mestis team and the Liiga team, such as loaning players from Liiga to help the Mestis team or positioning young players from Liiga to develop further in Mestis, or raising well-performing players from Mestis to the Liiga team as a reward for good performances.

5.2 Main Development Points for Mestis

The second question in the interview process was about the main development points for Mestis as perceived by the various stakeholders (see Appendix 2). While this question had potential for a large variety of opinions, the majority of the answers focused on elevating the status and appreciation level of Mestis (n=7), with three others focusing on the finances (n=3). The main arguments from each interview participant as based on the transcript coding are listed in table 4.

Table 4. Main development points for Mestis by each interview participant (N=10)

Participant	Main development point
1	Overall appreciation
2	Raise in the status
3	Raising the overall interest
4	Appreciation
5	Raising the brand value
6	Increasing visibility and appreciation
7	Finances and visibility
8	Number of games, travel, financial challenges, the schedule
9	Organizations, finances, professionalism
10	Identity and branding

As can be seen from table 4, most of the participants saw the main development point for the Mestis Hockey League to be an increase in the value, appreciation and status of Mestis. This can be said to reflect the perceptions about the current position in Mestis (see subchapter 5.1) where most participants were not pleased with the current position. Again, the role of Mestis in competitive Finnish ice hockey appears to need development so that the position of the league and its organizations will be elevated in the eyes of the public, the sponsors and all Finnish hockey stakeholders. It would appear that Mestis requires active efforts to raise its status, and these efforts can come from various fields but for Mestis to thrive as a competitive hockey league, the first step would be to return the true competitive edge to the league through the re-installation of the Liiga promotion possibility.

It can be argued that approaching the status of Mestis through its main point, the competition, would allow the league and its organization to improve their finances which was another main concern for many participants. If Mestis and Liiga were to reinstate the promotion/demotion competition at the end of the season, this would undoubtedly heighten the interest in Mestis also in the eyes of many Liiga team regions.

Some of the other development points outside of the status and the finances were the challenges of implementing an effective schedule and program for a league with 13 teams stretched all over Finland, a geographically extensive area. Admittedly, one of the season challenges is the game schedule, with typically two games played every week (Wednesday and Friday), at times three games may be possible (added Saturday) (Mestis 2017). Because of the long distances between some Mestis areas, such as southern Finland and northern Finland, teams are often required to travel for long distances and long times. Also because Mestis teams have limited budgets, the travel typically takes place by bus, which can mean a long road-trip for southern teams to travel to e.g. Rovaniemi and Kajaani (Raunio 2017). However, if Mestis is able to elevate its overall status, visibility and appreciation, this can also mean improved funding for travel arrangements.

One of the issues connected with the development of Mestis in the interview process was for the participants to estimate the best or optimal number of teams in the Mestis Hockey League (question 4). The current number of teams in season 2016-2017 is 13. The optimal numbers suggested by the participants in the interviews are listed in figure 11.

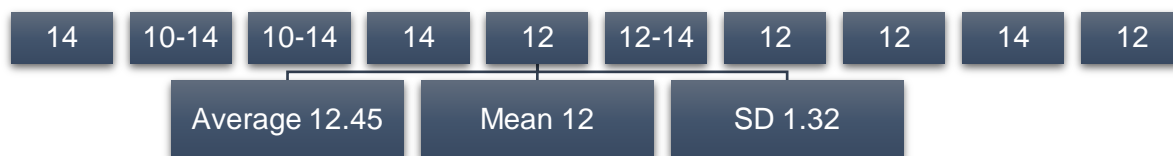


Figure 11. The optimal number of teams in Mestis according to the interviews (N=10)

As can be seen from figure 12, the range of the number of teams was not large as it only ranged between 10 and 14, with standard deviation (SD) only at 1.32. The calculated average was 12.45 teams and the mean 12 so overall it can be said that 12 appears to be the optimal team number, while the current number of teams in Mestis is 13. Some interview participants (P8, P9) commented in the interviews that the number of teams in Mestis would be dependent on the number of teams in Liiga so that if Liiga had 12 teams, Mestis could have 14 teams, or the other way around with 14 in Liiga and 12 in Mestis.

5.3 Mestis and Liiga

As can be seen from the previous subchapters, the fates of Mestis and Liiga appear to be inevitably linked. Therefore as part of this study into the development of Mestis, it was important to ask the study participants also about their views on Mestis and Liiga. Some points have been raised already in the previous subchapters but this subchapter focuses on the stakeholder views on the sporting competition between Mestis and Liiga and the current and future cooperation between these two largest hockey leagues in Finland.

5.3.1 Sporting Competition and Possible Promotion

In question five of the interview, participants were asked whether Mestis teams should have a chance to be promoted to Liiga, as was the norm before the closing of Liiga in 2013 (SuomiKiekko 2015). With these Mestis stakeholder interviewees, all of them (n=10) felt that there must be a promotion possibility from Mestis. This unanimous perception can be said to signal the frustration felt by Mestis organizations towards a system that does not recognize sporting success and competition but instead relies on financial reasons and the financial protection of Liiga organizations.

While all the interview participants unanimously viewed there should be a chance of promotion from Mestis to Liiga, the basis for promotion was a more divided issue. In the interview process (see Appendix 2) the participants were asked whether promotion should take place based on 1) sporting success, i.e. essentially winning the Mestis championship, 2) meeting certain financial conditions imposed by Liiga, or 3) matching both of the above requirements. The division of views with the ten participants were:

- Based on sporting success (n=2)
- Based on meeting financial conditions (n=0)
- Based on both requirements (n=8)

As can be seen from the division, none of the interview participants wanted the promotion to take place only through meeting financial criteria, i.e. without the competitive element. This can be said to signal to both Mestis and Liiga that previous decisions made about promotions were wrong and unjustified. For instance, in 2014-2015 Sport Vaasa was promoted to Liiga to replace Jokerit Helsinki who moved to play in the Russian KHL League (Hakola & Sippola 2014), but the promotion decision can be said to have been

mostly for financial reasons because Sport had finished 5th in Mestis in the previous season. Another case of “money for promotion” was a year later when KooKoo Kouvola, who had finished second in Mestis, were promoted while the Mestis champions Jukurit Mikkeli remained in Mestis. At the time, it was estimated in the media that the promotion to Liiga had cost Sport and KooKoo some 1.8 million euros each (Kössö 2016).

Two of the interview participants wanted promotion to Mestis to take place only from a sporting success perspective (n=2), essentially meaning that the champion of Mestis in each season would be either automatically promoted to Liiga or would automatically enter a promotion/demotion series with the bottom team in Liiga. However, because of the financial realities of competitive Finnish sports today, the majority of the Mestis stakeholders in this study envisioned the promotion to take place through a combination of both sporting success and financial conditions (n=8). Liiga as a hockey league can be said to be very demanding financially (Hänninen & Kössö 2016) so for many teams or Mestis champions it would be counter-effective to enter Liiga without a solid financial background and secured funds for the Liiga season.

5.3.2 Increased Cooperation

As all the interview participants were strongly in favor of the chance of promotion from Mestis to Liiga, nine of the ten (n=9) also felt Mestis should deepen its cooperation with Liiga (question 6, see appendix 2). One participant (P10) felt the situation was acceptable but all the other stakeholders indicated various elements that could be implemented or introduced to further the cooperation and coexistence between Mestis and Liiga.

This final question of the semi-structured interview provided the largest variation of points and elements, which are illustrated with direct quotations from all participants, translated from the original Finnish:

P1: *“I would like to see more cooperation in the player traffic between Mestis and Liiga.”*

P2: *“There should be more cooperation with off-the-ice issues.”*

P3: *“Mestis should have more visibility without the ‘farm team’ aspect, and more benefit from the cooperation for both parties, win-win for both.”*

P4: *“Player cooperation should be increased.”*

- P5: *“The league system and the player transfer systems should be renewed, also attention to the TV-right deals.”*
- P6: *“There should be a joint TV-deal, more marketing cooperation and more league cooperation.”*
- P7: *“Definitely deeper cooperation with the Mestis team and its Liiga partner, more Liiga cooperation with the Mestis team, more marketing cooperation.”*
- P8: *“There should be more open discussion about the league system, a clearer system for player cooperation and more long-term consistency to player cooperation.”*
- P9: *“More team-specific cooperation with a Mestis team and its Liiga partner, more funding from Liiga.”*
- P10: *“The current situation is acceptable, Mestis should remain independent. There is a need for Mestis, Mestis is a great league.”*

A closer inspection of these quotations and the interview transcript codes in general reveals three main themes for the increased cooperation: **players**, the **system** and the **marketing**. In various comments the cooperation between Mestis and Liiga teams regarding their players is recognized but the underlying tone is one of ‘Liiga takes, Mestis suffers’. This means that often the larger Liiga team requests players from their smaller Mestis partnership team whenever they need players to fill in for injured players or otherwise fill the roster. This transfer traffic can be very one-sided during a season, and it often leaves many Mestis teams struggling with depleted rosters in key points of the Mestis season.

Clearly, in the study participants’ views, the player traffic should be more consistent, have consistent rules or guidelines and be mutually beneficial so that Mestis teams could also get Liiga players on a consistent basis, or depending on the mutually agreed contract. At times some Mestis teams may feel, myself included at times, that they play and function better with a consistent line-up that does not include constantly changing lines or players, even if it means no loan players from the Liiga team.

Another element of substance in the participants’ views was the functionality of the league system. While some interview participants focused more on the Mestis system, some also brought up both Mestis and Liiga and what the improved systems for both leagues could entail. The system can also be said to be linked to the number of teams, as discussed in subchapter 5.2, but arguably, larger changes could be made to the schedule, games and competitive element of both leagues. Again, for many Mestis stakeholders involved in this study, this also would mean reinstating the promotion possibility for Mestis teams, as discussed in subchapter 5.3.1.

From a sport marketing perspective, there was also desire from the Mestis stakeholders to develop the marketing, financial and visibility perspectives of both leagues. More funding to Mestis organizations from Liiga was mentioned as one suggestion and others suggested a new television rights deal for Mestis or one that operated in stronger cooperation with Liiga. Improved media coverage could certainly help Mestis and its organizations to gain more visibility and appreciation all over Finland. The current broadcasting deal Mestis has with an online provider Fanseat and a paid service Elisa Viihde has not been successful in attracting new consumers to Mestis products.

6 Conclusions

This chapter presents the conclusions of the study's results, including the suggested organizational development model for the Mestis Hockey League, created through the findings of the research process. This chapter will also examine the reliability and validity of the study and offer suggestions for further research.

6.1 Development Model for Mestis

Based on the examination of the Mestis Hockey League (chapter 2), the fundamentals of developing sport organization (chapter 3) and the results provided in this study (chapter 5), the two-part development model for the Mestis Hockey League is as follows:

1. Increase the visibility, status and appreciation of Mestis

This first item in the development model was the most frequently suggested by the Mestis stakeholders in this study. There can be various ways to develop this aspect, some financial and some organizational. From a sport marketing and management perspective, the development would include a stronger press presence. Mestis currently employs one person in charge of all media activity and communication and for a sport league this size, it is insufficient. Mestis as a league has also not encouraged its organizations enough into cooperation in terms of media or visibility, so these elements should be improved drastically, and as soon as possible, to improve the market visibility of Mestis.

Another sport marketing element is the media coverage of Mestis where improvements could make a dramatic difference in the visibility. Mestis currently broadcasts its games through the subscription services Fanseat and Elisa Viihde but this decision can be considered a mistake because the subscription rates to either service have not been satisfactory and have instead taken Mestis further away from the average Finnish ice hockey fan and consumer. A small improvement has already taken place when YLE, the Finnish broadcasting company, took a selection of Mestis games as part of its 'Urheiluviikonloppu' theme, which has meant Mestis games have been shown on YLE channel 2 roughly once a month in the current 2016-2017 season. Despite the small scale of this cooperation, the impact to Mestis visibility has been clear and this cooperation should continue on a larger scale in the future.

To raise the actual status and appreciation of Mestis may be more challenging but not impossible. However, this does require a change in the way the top two Finnish ice hockey leagues operate. Essentially, the promotion possibility from Mestis to Liiga must be reinstated. This development requires the Mestis league, Suomen Sarjaseurat ry and the Finnish Ice Hockey Association to recognize that limiting the competitive value of Mestis by closing off Liiga and denying promotion from Mestis has been and continues to be bad for Finnish ice hockey. The decision has been detrimental to young Finnish players, the organizations playing in Mestis and the hockey-loving Finnish public.

While the change can be challenging and many Liiga and Mestis organizations and other stakeholders may be worried about their financial status and profits, the change can be made if there is the will from all parties. The promotion possibility is a necessity to keep Mestis an interesting and viable hockey league with a relevant status in Finnish sports and appreciation in Finnish hockey. Otherwise, Mestis and its organizations will dwindle into oblivion.

2. Improve the financial situation of Mestis and its organizations

The second key element in the development model, and another that came up strongly in the study data with Mestis stakeholders, is for Mestis to improve its financial structure and viability. In general, Mestis should pay closer attention to the 5Ps of sport marketing. The overall product of Mestis must be appealing and provide benefits for the consumer and the price to the consumer must be reasonable (live games, televised games) and financially reasonable to the Mestis organizations. The place, i.e. the Mestis team venues, must be high quality and appealing and the people involved committed, dedicated and of quality. The final P, promotion, would refer to the ability of Mestis to satisfy its customers through advertising, personal selling, sales promotions, sponsorship and public relations.

I believe Mestis as a product is in relatively good condition but from a marketing perspective there is also much to improve. Mestis games offer sporting and entertainment value to the consumers, games are often lively and fast-paced as a result of young player material and the large number of goals. These elements of excitement are still an underutilized feature in Mestis marketing and development of operations.

All these increased and improved efforts would financially benefit the Mestis league and the individual organizations. Mestis must be more directly involved in the pricing levels of its organizations and take a stronger stance towards affordable hockey entertainment in Finland. In Addition, if Mestis were reduced to 12 teams, which was the preferred number based on the stakeholder views in this study, this could mean the organizations and league could function more effectively with a more focused game schedule, less costly travel, more high-visibility game events and improved media coverage, as discussed earlier.

Ideally, Liiga would also be a more active part of funding and supporting Mestis teams financially. The cooperation with Liiga teams and their Mestis partners can be developed but it would also seem fair that Liiga, with the high revenues and turnovers, would pay more attention to their Mestis partner teams where the financial circumstances may be more stretched but the player transfers and loans to Liiga continue to provide the Liiga team added value. Liiga and Mestis could also cooperate more effectively in the field of marketing, so that both leagues would benefit more strongly from the financial resources available for Finnish hockey today and that the resources would be shared more equally to benefit all hockey organizations.

Therefore the results of this study also seem to support the SWOT analysis regarding Mestis Hockey League, as introduced in chapter 3.4. The strengths of Mestis in terms of cost-efficiency, hockey experience and locality could also be seen as strengths under an improved league organization and financial support for Mestis organizations. The weaknesses of small operations, budgets and economics areas, however, could be developed with more attention to the financial situation of both the league and its organizations. Further, increased cooperation with Liiga and the Finnish Ice Hockey Association could help in supporting the economic viability of the various Mestis regions and expand the organizations, their budgets and thus their influence.

The opportunities analyzed in the Mestis SWOT analysis can also be seen to be supported with the results of this study. Increased cooperation with Liiga was a common development point among the interviewees, as was the transfer of players and generating more public interest, visibility and attraction for Mestis as a league. Finally, it can also be argued that if Mestis does not implement actions to increase its status, visibility and appreciation, the threats analyzed in the SWOT analysis continue to be realized. Mestis must avoid an uncertain future, it must avoid the lack of direction and it must be more financially responsible towards its organizations for the league to thrive in the future.

6.2 Reliability and Validity of the Study

As with any study, the validity and reliability of this study rely on the researcher. The selection of the topic for this study was based on my experience with Mestis as a player and as a coach and my wish to see development in the league. Because of my position in a Mestis organization and my interest to study the Mestis Hockey League, this created potential for researcher bias. This study allowed me the advantages of an insider and with relatively convenient data collection; however I had to be consciously aware of the potential subjectivity and ethical complications with the study subjects, power relations and professional practice (Unluer 2012, 5-6).

To counter the subjectivity and researcher bias, throughout the research process I attempted to ensure the credibility of the research with internal and external supervision to monitor my own practices during the study process and data collection (Skinner et al. 2015, 80-81). During the interviews, I emphasized the anonymity and the objectivity of the research data to encourage the Mestis stakeholders, many of whom I was previously familiar with, to provide honest and unrestricted views about their perceptions of Mestis and the direction in which Mestis should develop.

Throughout the research process and in its end result, this written contribution, I attempted to document and justify my choices to allow the reader to follow and evaluate the quality of the results. Ideally, the qualitative data could have been more extensive to allow for more comprehensive analysis. Still overall, it could be argued that the research process included conscious monitoring of the validity of the study. This approach included the use of consistent and transparent methods and procedures for the data collection and analysis, as well as the selection of participants consistent with the overall purpose of the study.

6.3 Suggestions for Further Research

This study has been one look into how to develop an ice hockey league in Finland. Therefore, the approach is specific and limited and much more research on this topic and related topics can be performed. Additional research could be done, for instance, with the higher level Liiga league and its organizations, or the lower-level Suomi-Sarja. Studies into those leagues could provide a larger insight into ice hockey league and organizations in Finland, and provide a comparative view with the results of this study.

On the other hand, study into the Mestis Hockey League could also be taken further because of the limited size and scope of this study. With a semi-structured interview methodology with ten participants, the results remain inevitably limited, so a more extensive study into the Mestis Hockey League and/or its organizations could be performed. A mixed methods study combining an electronic survey instrument and individual or focus group interviews could be one way to study Mestis more carefully in an effort provide further suggestions for the development of Mestis.

Alternatively, similar research could be performed outside the realm of ice hockey. Finland is a country with many professional and semi-professional sport leagues and organizations and many of them could benefit from a research-based examination into the operation and development potential of the league. Therefore, a similar study with various league or organization stakeholders could be performed e.g. in football with the Veikkausliiga or the Mestis equivalent Ykkönen.

Finally, although change is always a challenging process, hopefully this study will see some or all of its suggestions for the development of Mestis implemented in the near future. Players and coaches around Mestis, such as the various stakeholders in this study, all share a genuine concern for Mestis and actions must be taken before it is too late. The intention of this study and the development model proposed in this study is to act as a catalyst in the rebuilding process for Mestis, and once the common ground has been found between the Mestis Hockey League and the organizations in it, the changes will be implemented.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Informed consent form for the interviews

(Translated from Finnish by Tuomainen in 2017)

Informed consent form for the interview

This form is connected to a Master's thesis study performed at HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences regarding the Mestis Hockey League and its development.

The interview is estimated to last c. 30 minutes and will be audio recorded. All the information will be handled according to the Finnish Personal Data Act. Participants cannot be identified from the data and the data will be used only for this study.

Marko Tuomainen

Student at HAAGA-HELIA Master's Degree programme in Sport Development and Management

Tel. 050-123 4567

Email. xx@email.com

Please tick the box to signal your consent.

I agree to be interviewed about my perceptions of the Mestis Hockey League and its development.

Please read the following and fill in your details if you agree.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and I can cancel my consent at any time without giving a reason. I am entitled to receive information about the results of the completed study.

Name: _____

E-mail address and/or telephone number: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Appendix 2. Interview questions

(Translated from Finnish by Tuomainen in 2017)

Marko Tuomainen

SPOMA 15

Master's Thesis

An Organizational Development Model for Mestis Hockey League

INTERVIEW (SEMI-STRUCTURED)

1. What is your current role in Mestis?
2. Are you pleased with the current situation of Mestis?
3. What is the main development point in Mestis?
4. What would be the optimal number of teams in Mestis?
5. Should Mestis teams have a chance of promotion to Liiga?

If yes;

1. Based on sporting success;
 2. Based on finances and conditions;
 3. Based on both above?
6. Should Mestis deepen its cooperation with Liiga?

If yes, how?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ANSWERS AND VIEWS!