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### Barriers of Attendance For The Syracuse Crunch

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## Barriers of Attendance For The Syracuse Crunch

### Abstract

The main purpose of this research was to identify the different barriers that could impact attendance for the Syracuse Crunch, a minor league hockey team (AHL). The results of this study provided the Syracuse Crunch front office with information that could have the possibility of improving marketing and promotional strategies to its varying consumer database. Prior to this study, a great amount of research has been conducted that identifies the factors that contribute to one's attendance at other professional sporting events, however, there are limited amounts of research that have looked to uncover what effects attendance at the minor league level. Furthermore, past research hasn't looked greatly in detail on what effects attendance at minor league hockey games. This study utilized a survey based design using quantitative data in order to identify which barriers more frequently effect the attendance of Syracuse Crunch fans. The survey was sent to initial participants, and in turn, was distributed by these participants to other people that were interested in participating in this study. Results from this research identified that in-game atmosphere had the greatest impact on attendance as well as friends and family influence, and ease of access being among other contributing factors of attendance at Syracuse Crunch games. With renovations set to occur during 2017-2018 offseason, knowing that in-game atmosphere is such a great determinant will have a strong influence on what is done to create a better experience at Syracuse Crunch games.

### Document Type

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### Professor's Name

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Barriers of Attendance: Syracuse Crunch

**Barriers of Attendance: The Study on the Syracuse Crunch (AHL)**

Nicholas Bovenzi

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May 3, 2017

## **Executive Summary**

The main purpose of this research was to identify the different barriers that could impact attendance for the Syracuse Crunch, a minor league hockey team (AHL). The results of this study provided the Syracuse Crunch front office with information that could have the possibility of improving marketing and promotional strategies to its varying consumer database. Prior to this study, a great amount of research has been conducted that identifies the factors that contribute to one's attendance at other professional sporting events, however, there are limited amounts of research that have looked to uncover what effects attendance at the minor league level. Furthermore, past research hasn't looked greatly in detail on what effects attendance at minor league hockey games.

This study utilized a survey based design using quantitative data in order to identify which barriers more frequently effect the attendance of Syracuse Crunch fans. The survey was sent to initial participants, and in turn, was distributed by these participants to other people that were interested in participating in this study.

Results from this research identified that in-game atmosphere had the greatest impact on attendance as well as friends and family influence, and ease of access being among other contributing factors of attendance at Syracuse Crunch games. With renovations set to occur during 2017-2018 offseason, knowing that in-game atmosphere is such a great determinant will have a strong influence on what is done to create a better experience at Syracuse Crunch games.

## **Introduction**

Sport consumption in relation to barriers that negatively impact fan attendance has been widely examined in professional sport organizations such as Major League Baseball (MLB), the

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National Basketball Association (NBA), the National Football League (NFL), and the National Hockey League (NHL) (Coates & Humphreys, 2010; Larkin, 2015; Larkin, Fink, & Trail, 2015; Sangkwon Lee & Chi-Ok Oh, 2016; Stadler Blank, Sweeney, & Fuller, 2014). In addition, limited work has been conducted to identify and discuss the barriers of fan preferences in the American Hockey League (AHL) while attending a live game (Paul, Weinbach, and Robbins, 2013). With everything considered in these past studies, there is little knowledge regarding non-game related barriers that prevent attendance at the minor league level (AHL).

The American Hockey League is considered a developmental league that prepares players for their future in the National Hockey League (NHL). There are a total of thirty teams that make up the AHL, and five of those teams are represented within New York State. It was important to note the competition each team has to remove barriers from potential fans because of the competition. The objective of this research was to study the barriers of attendance for Syracuse Crunch games. A large amount of research has been previously conducted to identify the barriers of attending other professional sporting events, however, the lack of knowledge falls in the area of barriers at the minor league level. It is understood that in game fan preferences such as fighting, team success, and promotions have a significant effect on AHL attendance. This research had a practical application because it provided the Syracuse Crunch front office on how to better market and promote the team around known barriers that exists to certain fans.

The purpose of this research was to determine what attendance barriers exist for Syracuse Crunch games. The research question of this study was:

What are the barriers to fan attendance for Syracuse Crunch games?

The aim of this research was to present a deeper understanding of the barriers that exist in professional hockey at the minor league level.

## **Background**

### **Fan Attendance**

Attending professional sporting events is one of the key components to the overall success of sport organizations. For this research study, fan attendance was defined as the act of a fan going to a sporting event and purchasing a ticket (or vice versa), and watching the game in its full duration. With fan attendance, evidence from previous research suggests that passion is linked directly to team identification, and in turn, relates to attending a sporting event. Passion is defined as “a strong inclination toward an activity that people like (Vallerand, 2008), that they find important, and in which they invest time and energy” (p.757). Passion itself promotes avid consumption, and it lies close to one’s decision to attend sporting events (Wakefield, 2016). It can also demonstrate the most variance in fans’ consumption of game-related television, radio, news, and social media. Team identification has been found to strengthen motives to attend events (Kim, Trail, & Magnesen, 2013). The results of from another piece of research (Kim & Trail, 2010) showed that fans were more motivated to attend a game because they identified with the team.

Sports consumers can sustain their positive identity and level of connectedness to a particular social group by engaging in public displays of social interaction. Kim, Trail, & Magnesen also point out that as this level of identification grows stronger, the strength of the relationship between social interaction and sports consumer attendance intention may increase. Other similar feelings along with self-esteem are those that fans feel they deserve to experience in return for the time and money spent at sports games (Gencer, Kiremitci, Boyacioglu, 2011). In certain situations, however, one’s identification toward a team may not be enough to ensure that they’ll attend a game. Robinson & Trail also point out a number of attachment points such as

team, players, coach, society, type, and level of sport that could be of great importance for the spectator. This is important because it helps better clarify the multiple factors of how one identifies themselves with their favorite team.

### **Barriers in Professional Sport**

In relation to live sport consumption, barriers to attendance are presumed to represent “factors that impede or inhibit an individual from attending a sporting event” (Kim & Trail, 2010, p.191). Recent research has shown what constraints cause individuals to stay away from arenas, stadiums, and venues of MLB, NBA, NFL, and NHL teams (Coates & Humphreys, 2010; Larkin, 2015; Larkin, Fink, & Trail, 2015; Sangkwon Lee & Chi-Ok Oh, 2016; Stadler Blank, Sweeney, & Fuller, 2014). Furthermore, there is a great deal to consider when it comes to the overall live game experience. When it comes to team performance, fans do not purchase tickets to see close games, they prefer to attend games they expect their teams to win and avert those that the team is expected to lose (Coates & Humphreys, 2010). Teams that are consistently good can get the benefit of the doubt from their fans while consistently bad teams do not. This finding is consistent with previous literature (Kim & Trail, 2010), which also indicated that lack of team success was a significant predictor of sport consumption behavior. The stadium the home team plays in also plays a factor on overall attendance. The results from participants that took part in semi-structured interviews on the factors that influence attendance from a spectator’s point of view revealed that they preferred up-to-date facilities that can provide them with a host of amenities. They also announced that if it was difficult to park or difficult to get in and out of the facility, it would push them away from attending sporting events.

These results are important because advances in technology and the home viewing experience can play a role in constraining attendance (Stadler Blank, Sweeney, & Fuller).

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Staying at home and watching the game may make for a more attractive option, as research from Larkin, Fink, & Trail, 2015 indicated that individuals display sport media consumption substitution intentions partly due to the ability to watch a crystal clear broadcast of the event from the comfort and relaxation of their own home. This relates to live game experience because a negative atmosphere can constrain attendance. For example, aggressive and/or belligerent fans can detract from the overall experience (Stadler Blank, Sweeney, & Fuller, 2014). The idea of being able to watch the game at home plays a significant role in attending games because live sporting events are becoming a greater financial burden even to middle income groups that represent a majority of the US population (Sangkwon Lee & Chi-Ok Oh, 2016). This research noted that purchasing tickets is only a small portion of the total expenditures of sport consumers and thus they frequently spend a considerable amount of money on fuel, parking, concessions, and merchandises. Other research constantly identifies that income is a large determinant in attending live sporting events. When looking at minority- specific attendance, cost can be a huge factor. Stadler Blank, Sweeney, & Fuller, 2014, found that being able to spend money on other things (i.e. concessions, parking, non-game related expenses) was an important consideration when it comes to minorities attending sporting events. When relating the burden of sport affordability back to a general scale, cost can be considered a more insurmountable barrier than others. For example, a fan may be willing to overcome frigid weather, a bad neighborhood, and the difficulty of parking to attend an event; however, if the individual does not have the financial capability to attend the event, there is little they can do to negotiate such a constraint (Larkin, Fink, & Trail, 2015).



## **The American Hockey League**

The American Hockey League is a thirty team developmental league that prepares players for their future of playing in the National Hockey League (NHL). While a wide variety of research exists to explain barriers in professional sports, there is very little work that identifies the barriers that affect attendance at the minor league hockey level. Previous studies on minor-league hockey games have focused solely on fan preferences while attending a live game (Paul, Weinbach, and Robbins, 2013). Their research found the role of fighting, team success (NHL & AHL), and in game promotions to have positive and significant effects on AHL attendance. Fighting in minor-league hockey games heavily influences live consumption, in that each additional fight per game that the home team averages, attendance increased by almost 1,000 fans. In addition to gameplay, not only do the attributes of the home team play a key role in attendance, but the more successful the NHL affiliate is, the higher the attendance level will be at its top developmental league city. Lastly, the research identified that not all promotions were the same with respect to fan behavior, and some promotions had a much greater impact on attendance than others. For example, the promotions that drew more fans to game were opening and closing nights as well as fan appreciation nights. Although it is important to be knowledgeable in what in game experiences cause individuals to not attend American Hockey League matchups, it is also important to be aware of other possible existing barriers away from the game that constrains overall attendance.

There are currently five American Hockey League teams that occupy the state of New York. These teams are the Albany Devils (affiliate of the New Jersey Devils), the Binghamton Senators (affiliate of the Ottawa Senators), the Rochester Americans (affiliate of the Buffalo Sabres), the Syracuse Crunch (affiliate of the Tampa Bay Lightning), and the Utica Comets

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(affiliate of the Vancouver Canucks). However, for this specific research, we narrowed in on only the Syracuse Crunch. The city of Syracuse, New York is home to much more besides the Crunch Hockey Club. Beyond the hockey team, there is the Syracuse Chiefs (MiLB), the Syracuse Silver Knights (MASL), and the Syracuse Orange (NCAAM). Outside of sport, people have access to many other exciting attractions such as Destiny USA, the seventh-largest shopping mall in the United States by retail space. The Syracuse Crunch has had a great deal of on-ice success since its affiliation change to the Tampa Bay Lightning (NHL) prior to the 2012-2013 season. However, since the affiliation change fans have witnessed the team appear three times in the Calder Cup Playoffs in the five years with the new parent club, as well as making it to the Calder Cup Finals in 2012-2013 and 2016-2017. The main purpose of this research was to identify the barriers of attending Syracuse Crunch games.

### **Method**

The purpose of this research was to identify the barriers of attendance for attending American Hockey League games for the Syracuse Crunch (affiliate of the Tampa Bay Lightning). This study employed quantitative research methods, which were notably useful when the goal of this research was to figure out which barriers were more consistent among others. A survey design was used in order to figure out what barriers were more significant to Syracuse Crunch fans.

### **Desired Sample/Sampling Method**

The desired sample for this survey included male and female individuals who were at least 18 years of age that have attended a Syracuse Crunch game. The original plan was to access the Crunch consumer database and have the survey be sent via email to all fans in the system. The database wasn't made available for research, instead however, a convenience sampling

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technique was utilized and a few individuals were contacted via a personal message on social media to take part in the research study. Other participants were found using a snowball sampling approach, as these initial participants made our data collection instrument available through social media and anyone interested were able to take part in this research study.

### **Data Collection**

Two questions were utilized to measure which barriers have the most negative impact on AHL game attendance. The variables that were applied to this survey included sport affordability, sport media consumption, family and friend influence, ease of access (to and from arena), team identification and brand association, and overall in-game experiences (game atmosphere). Participants were asked to rate their agreement to the different factors that could influence one's attendance on a five point Likert-type scale with labels of (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*. Respondents were also asked if they preferred other forms of local entertainment in the Syracuse area, and if so, were able to specify what those preferences were by marking all options that applied to them. Syracuse Orange Athletics (NCAA), Syracuse Chiefs baseball (MiLB), and Destiny USA mall attractions were entertainment options that were recognized for this study. Participants were also given the opportunity to address any specific preferences that weren't listed in a special "other" category. In order to figure out which barriers are more frequent among others, the data collected from this survey was calculated to find the mean and mode of the barriers of attendance for Syracuse Crunch games. In addition, two ANOVA tests were conducted to figure out if there are any relationships between barriers of attendance and a participant's age or gender.

## Results

There were 43 individuals out of 45 that participated and completed the survey for this research study on what possible barriers influenced their attendance at Syracuse Crunch games. Of these 43 people, 28 respondents (65%) were female while the other 15 (34%) participants were male. Each age group selected for the survey design was represented to some degree by participants, with the biggest percentages coming from the 18-34 range at 41% (n=18) and the 35-49 range at 30% (n=13). Each other age group was represented by few people, with the 50-64 range at 20% (n=9), and 65+ range at 7% (n=3). Over half of the population had attended only 1-2 Crunch games per year (58%). On the other hand, 11 respondents attended ten or more games per year (25%), six of them attended 3-5 games per year (14%), and only one participant said they attended 6-9 games per year (3%).

Income was considered to not influence someone to attend fewer games than they desired to. It was shown that 28 people (65%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that income contributed to their overall attendance while 11 of them (25%) either agreed or strongly agreed that their income had an impact on their attendance. Only four people (9%) said that income had neither a positive or negative impact on attending Crunch hockey games. The average answer participants chose for this statement was that they “disagreed” with it, and the most common answer was that people “strongly disagreed” that income influenced their attendance. When it comes to listening or watching the game in the safety and comfort of their own homes, 24 participants (55%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would rather stay at home and listen or watch the game at home while several people (16%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they would prefer to take advantage of their technology at home and either watch or listen in to a Syracuse Crunch game. 12 people (27%) thought that there was no positive or negative

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impact to the idea of staying home and tuning in to a game. The average answer that was selected regarding this statement was that they “disagreed” with it, and the most common answer that was chosen for this subject was that they “strongly disagreed” with the idea that spending time at home watching the game was a more viable option to them. When asked if family and friends influenced attendance of the respondents, there wasn’t anyone who categorized themselves as neutral toward the subject. However, 25 people (58%) who responded to this question said that they agreed or strongly agreed that their friends and family influenced them to attend a Crunch game, and 18 of them (41%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that their family or friends had an influence on whether they attended a game or not. On average, even though no participant selected this particular answer, the selections given created a neutral stance toward this statement, saying it had neither a positive or negative effect in attendance. With that being said, however, respondents more frequently selected that they agreed with this statement and that their friends and family effect their attendance.

When it came to ease of transportation to and from the venue, 29 of the 43 participants (67%) either agreed or strongly agreed that being able to get to and from the game as easily as possible is important to their overall attendance. Of the remaining 14 participants that answered this question, nine of them (21%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the ease of transportation effected their attendance at games, and five of them (11%) said that this had no positive or negative effect on their attendance. The answers given from participants created a neutral response on average, but similarly to friends and family, respondents more frequently agreed with this statement saying that the ability to get to and from the game as easily as possible is important to their attendance.

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There were 21 respondents (49%) that said they neither highly identified themselves as a Crunch fan or didn't identify as a Crunch fan at all. There were 14 participants (32%) that highly identified themselves as a Crunch fan while eight people (18%) said that they didn't highly identify themselves as a fan of the Syracuse Crunch. On average, as well as being most frequent, participants selected that they were neutral in regard to identifying themselves as a Crunch fan. There were 24 participants (55%) that agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed being able to exhibit their ability to associate themselves with the team brand. Nine participants (20%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, meaning they preferred not to associate themselves with the team brand, and ten of them (23%) declared a neutral standing toward brand association with the Syracuse Crunch. On average, a neutral stance was taken by participants in regards to this statement, but they responded more frequently with saying that they agreed that they enjoyed associating themselves with the Crunch team brand.

The game atmosphere at Crunch games had a much greater impact on one's attendance at a Syracuse Crunch game. There were 37 respondents (86%) that agreed or strongly agreed that the game atmosphere was important to one's decision of whether they attended a game or not. Only one respondent (2%) disagreed that the game atmosphere didn't affect their decision on attending a Crunch game, and five respondents (11%) said that the game atmosphere at Syracuse Crunch games had no positive or negative impact on their attendance. On average, people chose that they agreed with this statement, saying that game atmosphere has a significant effect on their attendance at games, and this answer was the most frequently chosen response among the participants. Lastly, when asked if the outcome of the game was important to their attendance, 18 respondents (41%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the outcome of a game would affect their attendance of games. Just 11 participants (25%) agreed or strongly agreed with this

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statement, meaning that the outcome of the game is important to their attendance, and 14 respondents (32%) said that the outcome of a Crunch game didn't affect their attendance positively or negatively. On average, participants disagreed with this statement, but a neutral stance was a more frequent answer among respondents.

When the 43 participants were asked if they preferred other forms of local entertainment, 34 of them (79%) answered with "yes" they did prefer other entertainment options within the Syracuse area. These individuals that selected "yes" were then specifically asked to indicate which forms of local entertainment were more preferable to them by selecting all options that applied to them, which included Syracuse Orange College Athletics, Syracuse Chiefs minor league baseball, and attractions at the Destiny USA mall. These participants were also given the opportunity to mention any other forms of entertainment that appealed to them. For Syracuse Orange athletics, 23 people (53%) said that they preferred this option and 11 of them (25%) said that they didn't. For Syracuse Chiefs minor league baseball, 8 people (18%) said that they preferred this option while the other 26 people (60%) said that they didn't. For Destiny USA attractions, 14 people (32%) said that they preferred this option while the other 20 people said that they didn't. When asked to mention if another form of local entertainment was more preferable to them and wasn't listed, 16 of them (37%) identified some form of entertainment and the other 17 people (39%) did not. The other different types of entertainment options that people preferred included going to concerts, the movies, or events that involved friends and family as well as attending games of the Syracuse Silver Knights, a professional indoor soccer team that are a part of the Major Arena Soccer League. Lastly, some participants responded by saying that they preferred to stay at home to watch other sporting events such as National

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Football League and National Hockey League games and some mentioned that they enjoyed watching auto racing from their homes as well.

Two other tests were also conducted in regards to barriers of attendance for Syracuse Crunch games in comparison to the gender and age of the overall population. An ANOVA test was used with 95% confidence ( $\alpha=.05$ ) that the means for the variables that effect attendance differed based on gender. When comparing gender to barriers of attendance, there was no significant relationship with income in respect to gender ( $p=.512$ ). In addition, there was no significant relationship with spending free time at home watching or listening to the game in respect to gender ( $p=.898$ ). There was also no significant relationship with family and friend influence in respect to gender. Similarly to that, there was no significant relationship with ease of transportation to and from games in respect to gender ( $p=.172$ ). There was also no significant relationship with fan identification in respect to gender ( $p=.117$ ), however, there was a significant relationship with brand association in respect to gender ( $p=.023$ ). Lastly, there was no significant relationship with game atmosphere ( $p=.532$ ) as well as game outcome ( $p=.146$ ) in respect to gender. These results created a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha of .025, which was similar when a test was performed when comparing the different barriers of attendance to the ages of the participants.

There was no significant relationship between income in respect to age ( $p=.953$ ). There was also no significant relationship when comparing free time spent at home watching or listening to a game in respect to age ( $p=.718$ ). In addition, there was also no significant relationship between family and friend influence in respect to age ( $p=.654$ ). On the other hand, there was a significant relationship between the ease of transportation to and from the game in respect to age ( $p=.072$ ). There was no significant relationship when comparing fan identification



in respect to age ( $p=.240$ ). Similar to identification, there was no significant relationship between brand association in respect to age ( $p=.193$ ). Lastly, there was also no significant relationship between game atmosphere ( $p=.205$ ) and game outcome ( $p=.633$ ) in respect to age.

### **Conclusion**

Given the growing financial burden of attending live sporting events at the highest level of professional sport and advancement of home technology, this study quantitatively examined the barriers that affect one's decision to attend games for the Syracuse Crunch. There is limited research that has addressed the determining factors of attendance at the minor league level, and there is even more limited information that is known in relation to non-game related research pertaining to the American Hockey League. The current study used previously known barriers to attendance such as income, sport media substitution, friends and family influence, ease of access, as well as other driving factors such as fan identification and brand association, in-game atmosphere and game outcome, and other forms of entertainment options in order to uncover the determining factors for attending Syracuse Crunch games.

Of the different barriers of attendance in sport, participants consistently identified in game atmosphere, friend and family influence, and ease of access (unique to both minor league and professional sport at the highest level) as the greatest determining factors to whether one attends a Syracuse Crunch game. These driving implications are supported by previous research, because in-game entertainment efforts drive attendance by putting "more emphasis on the fans" and by creating more "interactive" and "memorable experiences." The social sport of nature is going to a sporting event with others and enjoying that experience with them as a group. If it's difficult to park or difficult to get in and out of the facility, it pushes spectators away from attending sporting events (Stadler Blank, Sweeney, & Fuller, 2014).

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This study showed more frequently that income and home viewing options weren't factors that effected attendance for Syracuse Crunch fans. In addition, it is important to note that participants more commonly identified game outcome as a barrier that didn't influence their attendance at Syracuse Crunch games. These findings are completely different from that of professional sport at the highest level, as people prefer to spend their money on attending games they expect their teams to win and avert the games that the team is expected to lose (Coates & Humphreys, 2010). Furthermore, previously known fan preferences of minor league hockey games have shown that team success has had a positive and significant impact on attendance (Paul, Weinbach, & Robbins, 2013), therefore it differs from what was found in this particular study.

With the exposure and access of other entertainment options in the city of Syracuse, a significant majority of participants revealed that they preferred Syracuse Orange college athletics (basketball and football) and would rather attend these games instead of Syracuse Crunch games. This relates specifically to how participants identified themselves as Crunch fans, as a majority of responses showed a neutral stance to their identification or they didn't highly identify themselves as a fan of the Syracuse Crunch.

## **Limitations and Recommendations**

As with any research study that looks at a professional organization, gaining access to its entire consumer database isn't always guaranteed, and having control over what makes up the sample population is also out of reach. It is important to note that this particular research looked into one of the five American Hockey League teams that make up the state of New York, therefore it limited the overall population for this study.

In this scenario, the desired sample wasn't achieved due to the inaccessibility of the Crunch consumer database. Instead, the methods used for this study limited the amount of overall participants, however it still gave a general understanding of what impacted attendance for Syracuse Crunch games. One limitation to note for future research would be the ranges of age that were used for the survey. The barriers that could influence the attendance of those under the age of 18 should be considered as they move up within the Crunch fan base. In addition, other future research should go more in depth in by looking at the amount of games someone attended each year and what barriers affect them the most. This could have the opportunity to create specific promotional strategies and marketing options that target these specific groups of people in order to improve their overall attendance.

With this information being given to management of the Syracuse Crunch hockey club, it is important to note what has been successful in previous seasons as well as what can be done to improve overall attendance levels at games. With in-game atmosphere being a key determinant to attending these games and stadium renovations set to take place during the 2017-2018 offseason, it is important as to what is done in order to maintain and improve the overall game experience for the Syracuse Crunch.

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