

GAME CHANGERS

IN THE LAND OF 10,000 INNOVATIONS, VISIONARIES FROM THE GREATER MSP REGION ARE CHANGING THE WAY SPORTS ARE PLAYED.

Profile: Starting 11

Minnesota might be a long way from the United Kingdom, and is hardly known as ground zero for soccer, but many English Premier League fans unknowingly have a link to the Twin Cities in their pocket: a daily fantasy soccer game conceived, developed and run by a five-person team in Minneapolis.

PROFILE > Starting 11

TYPE > Fantasy soccer game start-up

STORY THEMES > Entrepreneurship
Fantasy sports
International sports
Angel investments

OVERVIEW > The world's most popular sport has a popular new fantasy app – and it was developed in Minnesota, far from soccer's core markets. But a combination of the right talent, support and investment has helped Starting 11 carve out a niche in daily fantasy soccer games, which it intends to grow rapidly in the coming months and years. With innovative scoring, gameplay and the ability to make live substitutions, Starting 11 is building a loyal user base and enhancing their enjoyment of the “beautiful game.”

KEY PEOPLE > Teague Orgeman, co-founder and CEO
Amanda Heyman, co-founder and chief operating officer

KEY QUOTE > *“Investors here want to invest in Minnesota companies. There are so many networks and events and opportunities. It's getting more robust year by year.”*
- Amanda Heyman

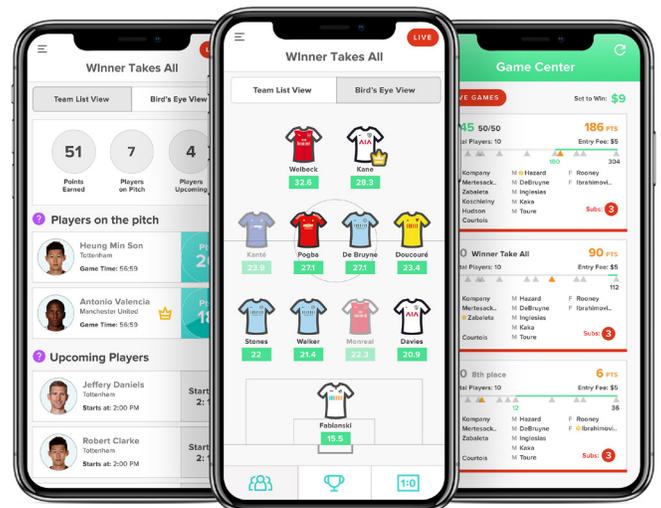
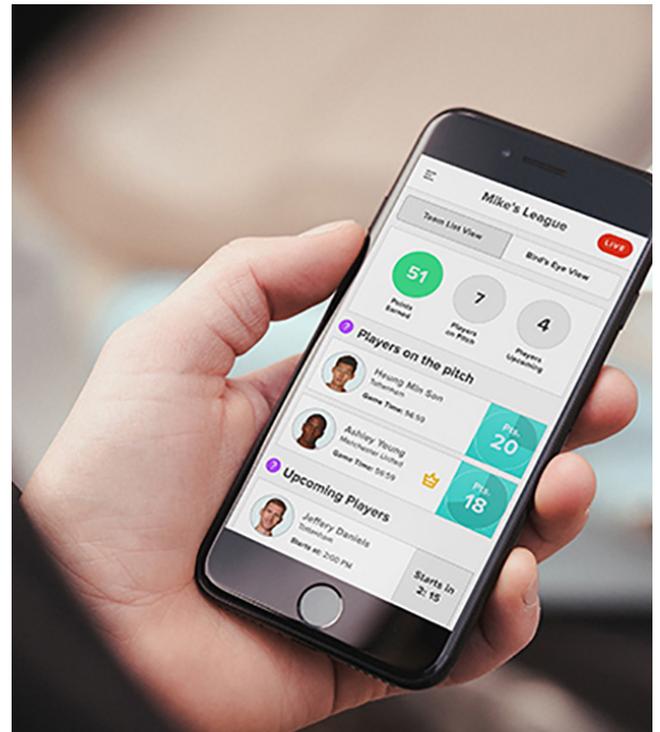
“The thing I was struck by was how open everyone ... was to helping others. People invite me to their house to talk business. It's a really decent, kind community.”
- Teague Orgeman

WEBSITE > starting11.io

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Profile: Starting 11



Minnesota might be a long way from the United Kingdom, and is hardly known as ground zero for soccer, but many English Premier League fans unknowingly have a link to the Twin Cities in their pocket: a daily fantasy soccer game conceived, developed and run by a five-person team in Minneapolis.

“We have users in 20 countries right now, and 60 to 65 percent of them are in the UK,” said co-founder and CEO Teague Orgeman. That’s really a snapshot of late 2017, however – the app launched just a few short months ago and is essentially in a soft launch period featuring only EPL players and free games, but plans to expand with cash games and more leagues (including the 2018 World Cup) soon.

According to co-founder and chief marketing officer Amanda Heyman, it isn’t so strange that Minnesota should be home to a soccer-focused tech startup. “There are a lot of talented people, and a lot of people who like soccer,” Heyman noted. Through their network, Heyman and Orgeman (who are married) and their co-founders assembled a team of developers, user experience experts, marketers and financial backers to get Starting 11 off the ground.

Minnesota is also home to the annual MN Cup entrepreneurial contest, put on by the Carlson School of Management, which is a focal point for Minnesota startups. The largest statewide startup competition in the nation, the MN Cup awards hundreds of thousands of dollars in seed money to winning startups, and in the process mentors and educates those founders. Starting11 won the high-tech division in 2017, but took away far more than just dollars.

“The thing I was struck by was how open everyone, including the competition, was to helping others,” said Orgeman. “People invite me to their house to talk business. It’s a really decent, kind community.”

ORIGINS AND INNOVATION: THE RIGHT TALENT WITH THE RIGHT PASSION

While it might seem like the fantasy sports space has been thoroughly explored, the Starting 11 team was able to identify a number of unique factors in soccer that created a white space they could fill.

First, the dominant soccer fantasy game is season-long – there wasn’t a leading daily fantasy game, despite the enormous worldwide popularity of the sport. Starting 11 is also unique in that it allows real-time, in-game substitutions, just like in the real game, which rewards passionate fans who are watching games live and might see a player go down, or recognize another player is getting hot.

Other innovations include balanced scoring that rewards strong play at every position, so that a defenseman can be as valuable as a forward. “It expands the valuable player pool,” Orgeman said, noting that the scoring system was inspired by early conversations with fantasy soccer players who were frustrated by fantasy games where only forwards were viable picks. “Otherwise everyone picks up the same couple players.”

All of Starting 11’s founders have some connection to soccer – Heyman herself played for 20 years – but the goal was to make the game both “engaging and accessible” for novice players.

“We got rid of the salary cap,” a common fixture in daily games, Heyman said. “You don’t have to do math, you can just pick your favorites.” At the same time, the more nuanced scoring rewards fans who go deep on research.

WORKING THE NETWORK FOR FUNDING AND EXPERTISE

With the concept fleshed out, the co-founders began looking to fill out other areas of expertise, which they were able to find in Minnesota.

“Finding people to work with us here was – I hate to say it was easy, but it was easy,” Orgeman said. “There are so many diverse talents here.” Software design and user experience expertise has been nurtured in the Twin Cities through its history in technology. Development expertise is rich in the area, attracted by large corporations. Marketing savvy is bolstered by the Twin Cities advertising industry, and Orgeman and Heyman themselves brought legal expertise.

From a funding perspective, the MN Cup led to connections in the area’s angel investors. “Being a winner carries weight in this town, said Heyman. “Also, investors here want to invest in Minnesota companies. There are so many networks and events and opportunities. It’s getting more robust year by year.”

Angel capital has helped Starting 11 execute one of its most critical early operations: Getting the game on player’s phones. (Starting 11 is mobile only, with no desktop companion, streamlining the operation and emphasizing the live viewer focus.)

The company has used narrowly-targeted Google advertising to find the best potential customers, and has forged relationships with influential fantasy soccer experts. Since Starting 11 features daily games, players are in need of more expert content. These experts, in turn, help build awareness of Starting 11.

WHAT’S NEXT: CASH GAMES, LEAGUE PLAY AND WORLDWIDE COMPETITION

Orgeman and Heyman are even more excited about 2018. “People want cash games. We’ll have cash games. People want leagues, where they play people they know. We’ll have that,” said Heyman.

More importantly, the game will start expanding to other leagues around the world, broadening the potential base and increasing revenue through the year. “We’ll be fully expanded in time for the 2018 World Cup,” said Orgeman. With 3.2 billion viewers, “that will be our springboard to other leagues.”

“We designed it to be able to grow really, really fast,” added Heyman, noting that with the basic game established, Starting 11 can add other leagues relatively simply. “All we need to do is plug in a new data feed and change the language.”

While the company will expand, there are no plans to leave its Minnesota roots. “We love it here,” Orgeman said. “It’s easy to forget how little time it has been since we launched, but we’re in a really exciting spot, not only due to our own efforts, but also the support from everyone else locally.”

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