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Chewing the fat over U.S. obesity

RICK BURTON

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Ever think about empires? Remember - the Roman Empire? The British Empire? How about the American Empire?

Empires don't last forever. A revealing predictor of when an empire has started to crumble is the point when the populace aggressively seeks the benefits of its wealth and privilege. The people get lazy. They stop working and start hanging around the bathhouse all day.

The other day, the local newspaper's lead headline read "Schools Brace for Cuts" and was accompanied by a photograph of a high school freshman baseball coach who had just lost his job.

That same week, another newspaper in town ran the headline "Fiscal Fitness: Schools eye PE cuts as kids gain flab." The story used photographs of an inner-city basketball backboard (complete with torn net) and a teen-age boy playing a computer game surrounded by two giant bottles of Coke, a Reese's peanut butter cup wrapper and a bag of Doritos.

The gist of both stories was simple. High school sport and physical education programs (at all levels of public education) are now routinely cut with each tax-related budget crisis. Second, youth and teen obesity is approaching epidemic proportions. Sounds like a high degree of correlation, doesn't it?

The statistics of inactivity are galling. Recent research suggests 13 percent of all American children are classified as overweight, and the number is growing rapidly. Since obese adolescents face the strong likelihood of entering adulthood overweight, we will see increasing health care costs associated with this disease.

In fact, according to one paper, "total healthcare and employer costs attributable to obesity alone during 1995 were an estimated \$99 billion." Newsweek.com in its Health & Fitness spring edition cited a National Institutes of Health estimate that "more than 61 percent of adults in the U.S. are now overweight or obese" and more than 300,000 people die from problems related to weight.

But here's the kicker: "If the epidemic continues," reported Newsweek.com, "the entire [U.S.] population will probably become overweight within the next three decades."

Is this data relevant to readers of this publication? You betcha. And here's why. As schools cut sports, the potential exists that children and teen-agers will play less. Logically, they will purchase less sporting equipment,

develop lesser avidity for traditional sports, identify less with professional athletes playing those traditional sports and find fewer reasons in adulthood to attend games featuring those sports.

Said another way, if a child can't play sports and can't afford to attend a sport as a spectator (we'll save the issue of pro sports teams pricing entire economic segments out of their stadiums for another column), what makes any of us believe today's teen-agers will suddenly emerge as paying fans when they have full-time jobs and disposable income?

International Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge knows it is a problem. "It is not just helping the Olympic Games we must care about, but helping all of sport," he said recently. "We must have the example of the champions that bring young people to sport."

If Rogge's concern is too specific to his property for you, listen to the December 2001 observations of U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher, who noted America must take an "informed, sensitive approach" toward educating its population about health issues related to overweight and obesity. We must, he said, "ensure daily, quality physical education in all school grades. Such education can develop the knowledge, attitudes, skills, behaviors and confidence needed to be physically active for life."

Translation: Sport and recreation are really good for us.

Naturally, most communities can't afford to listen to Satcher's logic because the alternative they face is cutting a traditional math, language, history or science class. And in the battle of PE vs. the three R's, PE loses. But if sport at school goes down and cyber-gaming at home goes up, obesity picks up an unwitting partner.

That's why certain sponsors of sport might want to think about this: What if the surgeon general decides someday that McDonald's cups, Coke cans and Doritos bags need warning panels (like cigarette packs) disclosing the risk of getting fat? What if he outlaws "supersizing" and "biggie sizing"?

What if Sony PlayStations, Nintendos and Microsoft Xboxes are required to feature in-game language such as "The surgeon general has determined use of this product may lead to sedentary behavior and increased risk of illnesses from high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, heart disease/stroke, arthritis, sleep disturbances and cancer"?

Might make all of us think about whether we need to get out ahead of this caloric avalanche and start investing in a healthy America. If we don't, the crusade to fight obesity will gain momentum like the social snowballs that mandated seat belts and calls for the eradication of smoking.

Such a crusade would cut into sport industry margins and possibly threaten the long-term health of the American sports empire. Why? Because it would divert and deflect billions of sponsorship, licensing and advertising dollars faster than your child scores touchdowns playing Madden 2002.

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