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Healthy Sports Economy Is Vital

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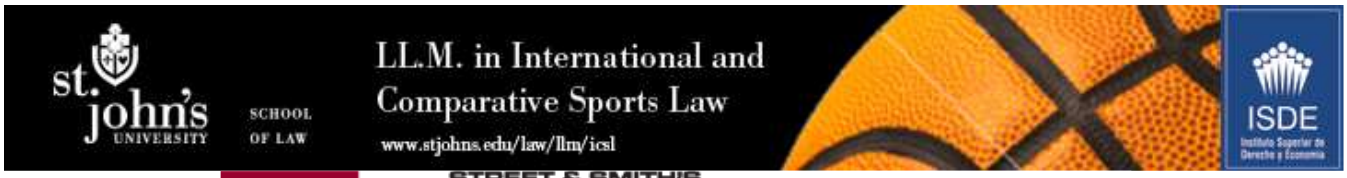

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Healthy sports economy is vital

RICK BURTON

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Do you buy into the concept that sport business is a major structural girder of American society? And not just the winning and losing part. Playing cards would do that.

No, I'm talking about the businesses that live off the entertainment, physical competition and emotional releases sport creates.

We need a healthy sport economy in America.

At a time when our country deals with the threat of terrorism, the reality of an approaching recession and the hubris of American business practices, sport — as a business — is critically valuable.

But we face tricky times ahead. Our country is getting back up on its collective feet, clearing away the debris (real and emotional) and facing a new future.

We have lots of experience at standing up. Particularly in our stadiums and arenas.

Sport always provides that uniting process.

Playing our "foolish" sports allows our hearts to soar. Yes, we were pretty low on Sept. 11. We grieved. We ached from losses too large to fathom. But we won't stay coiled up in fear.

Athletes and the businesses they stimulate enhance our everyday lives. They create thousands of salaries that, according to this publication, generate more than $200 billion in revenues annually.

Be honest with yourself. Athletes ultimately create opportunities for vendors to sell sodas in the upper deck or for broadcast networks to sell ad time to Nike, Coke, McDonald's and Miller beer. Elite athletes buy equipment and travel to games. They inspire us to copy them or follow them.

As silly as this will sound, athletes heroically show us the way. They play despite injuries, losing streaks and errors. They win through heroism, teamwork and courage.

Those cues, those irrefutable signposts, point the way as we face a strange new economy.

The smart athletes know they play on sacred fields. They know the true heroes in our society risk their lives for a fraction of what a benchwarmer earns. Smart marketers, such as Michael Jordan and the NFL, will dedicate salaries, gifts and efforts to the men and women who fight fires, haul wreckage or discover bodies. Or died because they were Americans.

As our real "everyday" heroes come off their shifts, numbed by the strangeness of a new America, they should see some images of the America we believe in and need. The "real heroes" should be able to drive to a stadium or turn on the TV to see monstrous home runs and diving touchdown catches.

Yes, those little things are incredibly unimportant in the larger picture.

But the athletic fireworks are a constant part of our American landscape. We need them for what they are: trail markers that get us back to what makes us distinct.

We are not perfect. We snipe at each other, hold grudges, talk too loudly and talk too much. We break the hearts of children and forget our elderly. We underpay teachers, policemen and janitors while overpaying entertainers and con artists.

But get this part right: We are Americans. We believe in sport as a symbolic icon of capitalism.

We believe in taking two and hitting to right. In running the counter trap and fooling the linebacker. In screening away from the ball to get the mismatch in the paint. We believe in our hearts that sport ultimately says, bring your five, six, nine or 11 players over here and let's get it on.

President Bush, our leaders and corporate executives face enormous cultural and financial challenges in the weeks ahead. Ultimately, though, we need to stand back up and make sure we keep our sports businesses healthy.

As Australian sports marketer Francis Farrelly said to me the night after the Sept. 11 tragedy, "Sport in America is truly your common cultural language. And at a time when your country is threatened, America needs this cultural touchstone to remind Americans of who they are and why they love who they are."

Good words for us not to forget.

Rick Burton is executive director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center in the University of Oregon's Lundquist College of Business.

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