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I have seen the future of sports, and it's sitting on a sofa

RICK BURTON

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I was up in Portland visiting the Trail Blazers the other day and saw the future of the sports world.

Sofas.

Big ol' sofas.

Hard to believe, isn't it? The one thing most of us have at home but never find at the arena. The one household item that could effortlessly build a bridge between the current sport business problem of empty seats and the timeless need for a down-in-the-basement, springs-sticking-out, good time.

Here's what the Blazers have done. They've taken the worst seats in their house (about a half mile from the floor in the Rose Garden) and built small living rooms. They're called Blazer Boxes and they're so far from the action, you're practically in another ZIP code.

But the seats are cheap (\$15 per) and the beer is cold. You have to buy 20 seats (\$300) but you get a private box, a bunch of sofas and menu service. We're talking male fantasy world (in a PC kind of way).

What's brilliant about the idea is that it's not about the game. It's about the atmosphere. And this high up, even God is using oxygen and binoculars.

The atmosphere is the one you'd create in your own living room if you had 19 friends, could afford to drink great Northwestern microbrews and didn't have to clean up after the game. You wouldn't worry about the score, you'd worry about laughing too hard at the high prices people were paying to watch jammers in pajamas.

Up in the Blazer Boxes, the game is reduced to the size of electric football players; the issues of professional sports get stylized into a Bizarro "Seinfeld" world. To quote the rock band Queen, "Nothing really matters."

Your arms are way too short to box with Paul Allen or Rasheed Wallace.

And speaking of electric football, my other big idea for the future is something MIT's Nicholas Negroponte wrote about back in 1995. He suggested a mere six years ago that holographic technology would soon exist to project the pro sports broadcast onto your living room floor. In 3-D.

Think about it. What if instead of watching the Lakers on a flat, one-dimensional screen (using the computing power of an electric toothbrush), you could project the dynamic images of sport onto your coffee table? What if you could see the angles, the dimensions, each play as it developed? What if you could pick the teams or even the players?

A friend of mine named Earl Shores has been researching electric football for more than a decade now and points out the first vibrating metal field game (complete with red and yellow plastic players) was invented by Tudor in 1949.

Now, 52 years later, instead of improving on a great idea, the best we can do is PlayStation 2. Don't get me wrong, PS2 is impressive. It's turned my 14-year-old son into the Godzilla of the couch lizards. He's learning to snowboard by twitching his fingers on two little black buttons.

But back in the '60s when I played on the Tudor NFL 510 (featuring the Colts and Packers), I could design my own plays. I could operate the scoreboard. I could pass or run, although passing with that little felt football was always tricky.

So we'd go outside and play in the streets. The best times were when the Northeast got a monster snowstorm and we could dive over the snowplow drifts into imaginary end zones. Then we went in for hot chocolate and grilled cheese sandwiches.

Yeah, I know nobody does that anymore. You can't let the kids out on the street because they're not safe. And you can't let them watch TV because there's too much sex and violence (and that's just the XFL and WWF). So we push them onto the computers figuring that's where they'll learn traits like leadership and teamwork.

If we could just get them off the Internet and into the stadiums, we'd be OK. We could set up lots of sofas and give everyone a Nerf ball. If the game got boring, you could go out into the concourse and play any sport you wanted. Football on Level 3, hoops behind the mezzanine. Soccer over by the Food Court. Batting cages in the basement.

See, maybe the future of sports isn't about how much we pay the pros but how we make sure kids enjoy the game. And the way I see it, the first stadium to promise security and fun, that everyone can trust, will make a mint.

Forget rich season-ticket holders who don't even watch the game anymore. Figure out a way to get the kids in the arena and help them play sports like the old days. Marry technology with safety and sofas.

Make it a big rumpus room and charge massive premiums to reintroduce kids to the joy of sports. No one gets snatched and everyone plays. Use the pros to give clinics when they're not out on the court entertaining.

Bottom line: Tackling on the sofas will be allowed.

That's what we did back in the '60s and '70s, and look at all of us. We turned out OK, didn't we?

Rick Burton is director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at the University of Oregon.

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