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Who's on Your Guest List for Dinner?

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Who’s on your guest list for dinner?

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Did you ever play that parlor game where you imagine staging a party to which you can invite anyone in history to dinner?

You know the game, right? You select a wide-ranging, eclectic group of people such as Albert Einstein, Jesus Christ, John Lennon, Winston Churchill, Joan of Arc, Robin Williams, Moses, Babe Ruth, Picasso, Amelia Earhart, Michael Jordan, Marilyn Monroe and your parents.

Usually, your selections are some kind of cultural ink blot test that defines your intelligence, taste, sense of humor and grasp of history.

I decided to play the game with one of our doctoral students the other day. Eric Koch was a member of the first graduate sports marketing class from the University of Oregon. While his classmates took jobs with the NFL, U.S. Soccer, the U.S. Olympic Committee, SFX, Yahoo!, Mattel, Intel and Visa, he stayed on for a Ph.D. focused on fan behavior and selective expertise.

I changed the rules to inviting only sports business luminaries (living or dead). I didn't give him anything more than that.

Koch's list featured Phil Knight, Paul Allen, Rupert Murdoch, Peter Ueberroth, Billie Jean King, David Stern, Carl Lewis, Lamar Hunt, Mark McCormack, Wayne Gretzky and David D'Allesandro.

Not bad, I said. In fact, very impressive.

My list looked like this (in alphabetical order):

Val Ackerman, president, WNBA

Bob Costas, NBC Sports broadcaster

Lee Ann Daly, senior vice president of marketing, ESPN

Frank Deford, writer, Sports Illustrated

Gary Jacobus, president, Trakus Inc.

Marion Jones, world class track athlete

Phil Knight, president, CEO and co-founder of Nike

Donna Lopiano, executive director, Women's Sports Foundation

Shaquille O'Neal, champion basketball player and technology "monstah"

Eli Primrose-Smith, vice president of IBM's sports sponsorships

Alan Ramadan, president and CEO, Quokka Sports

David Stern, commissioner, NBA

Tiger Woods, golfer and product endorser

Now, what do our lists say about anything? The fact that we picked only living people might suggest we're more interested in the future than the past. Additionally, while I was anxious to feature a diverse community, I was far from perfect on that component. Women should represent 51 percent of the invitations, and I don't see the Asian, Latino or international community represented sufficiently. That suggests to me a parochial North American view that seems incredibly shortsighted when discussing a global industry.

Where are Juan Antonio Samaranch, Yeoh Choo Hock, Sun Wen, Dr. Joao Havelange (or Sepp Blatter, for that matter), Michael Schumacher, Yao Ming, Pele and Michael Knight? Where are Cathy Freeman and Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki? Why aren't they at the table?

Before you write this off, let me explain where this exercise makes potential sense. Gathering folks together is never hard. But if you could invite anyone in sports business to dinner, what would you talk about? Would you talk about the dark sides of the Force? The future? The obligations still unmet?

Would we be willing to talk about what happens to global sport expansionism when the American economy hits the wall in about eight years?

Would we be comfortable talking about women's professional sports leagues without a subliminal chauvinist prejudice?

Would we discuss the likelihood of professional athletes starting their own leagues through virtual gaming?

Would we tackle the eligibility issues of the NCAA? Can U.S. college sports survive another 10 years of scandal, professionalism and sexism?

Where would we go with gambling, enhancement drugs and athlete violence? Are any of those elements detracting from the business of sport or are they, in a need-for-stimulation world, driving it?

Would we agree CBS-TV's "Survivor" is the future of televised sport?

Would we agree Major League Baseball is toast if there's a strike (or lockout) in August 2001?

Would we agree the National Hockey League might have to consolidate Canadian teams in order to survive? That or go to Europe and put teams in Russia, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, Norway, Germany and Finland?

To answer those questions, you'd need good guests. And, in our business, you need compelling storytellers to make it interesting and connect things with the commercial world. In my mind, Costas, Deford and Stern have been among the best at presenting the stories and making sports culturally relevant. Plus, Costas has a plan for saving baseball, and that subject alone would get us through the hors d'oeuvres.

Second, we really need to get at the issue of women's sports. In my mind, the future of sports will continue to focus on the emergence of women's competition. So Ackerman, Daly, Jones, Primrose-Smith and Lopiano make sense. We could all stand to listen to Lopiano or Jones more frequently.

Third, we've got to be prepared to talk technology. Stern and O'Neal can definitely double down in this category, but folks like Primrose-Smith, Ramadan and Jacobus will shape how fans and athletes experience or demand their sports in the future.

Last are the athletes. The list here features Knight (a former miler who builds products for athletes), O'Neal (another MVP who cares about kids), Jones (she will be the real deal in Sydney) and Woods (the golfer from another planet).

On certain levels, these athletes have been (or will be) the focus of our stories, endorsements and business. They lead by example, command respect and have the power to create positive change. In our celebrity-influenced world, these "stars" can almost single-handedly influence whether business takes sport away from the people or brings folks closer. Best of all, if Woods agrees to provide golfing tips on the front lawn, everyone invited will show up early and stay late.

OK, that's my list and my logic. Bottom line, I'm thinking there's a business idea in this concept. Wouldn't it be great if you could rent Stern, Woods or Costas for private dinner parties? Might give Tiger something to do in his spare time.

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