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WNBA, WUSA can save U.S. sports empire from itself

RICK BURTON

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I have a controversial, jingoistic theory. It goes like this: We need the WNBA and WUSA to save the American sports industry.

Howzat?

We all know America is an amazing place, right? But like other great empires before it (Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, British, XFL) have learned, complacent societies can get lazy. If you have it all, there's no need to keep working when sustaining excellence is so tedious.

In America's case, we've had a pretty good run on prosperity. And since we already have PlayStation 2 and will soon have the Microsoft X-Box, it's only a matter of time before most of us, but particularly boys, stop playing "real" sports and start losing valuable business skills like leadership, teamwork, courage and physical reliability.

Luckily, though, we have two genders. So, while the boys will be doing the potato dance on the couch, girls should find themselves continuing to rack up more time on the fields, rinks, courts and courses.

That means that in about 15 or 20 years, young women will have learned how to work together to win. Women will know how to make pressure decisions and motivate teammates. Women will have shared and handled the physical struggles that go into solving "real-world" business problems. In short, "soccer babes" will rule.

For more than 100 years (from the start of baseball in the late 1860s until the advent of Title IX in 1972), girls were denied the opportunity to play team sports. But by 2020, at least three generations of girls and women will have realized the benefits of team sports. By my way of thinking, women will truly be in the best position (not that some aren't already) to regularly diagram the appropriate strategies and take the last shot.

If the thought of boys abdicating leadership positions (or even positions of relevance) interests you, I have a suggestion. It is primarily aimed at the commissioners of men's professional sport.

But the rest of you in our industry might want to pay attention.

I got this crazy idea while attending the NBA's All-Star Game Technology Summit in February. NBA Commissioner David Stern had just concluded his remarks about the NBA's need for dynamic partnerships with technology companies and, in his homespun way, said, "shame on us if all we do is talk."

I turned to some of his employees and we talked about "public education" as another possible sports industry partner. We could run the triangle offense with pro sports leagues, corporate giants and schools. It's a script that would make organized sports groups stronger.

Confused? Try this. Ask yourself if the sports business (however you define that concept) has an obligation or a responsibility to America. Does sports, for all its revenue streams and instant millionaires, have an opportunity or a mandate?

You may be undecided, but if sports were to harness the grassroots power of America's public schools by bringing its heroes, technology, corporate sponsors and excitement into the classroom, then sports could leverage its competitive nature to keep America (and the world) healthier and more vibrant.

Sports and physical activity may ultimately prepare the best future employees.

Said another way, if sports is gauged now by the negative aspects of the men's pro leagues (declining ratings, empty seats, meanness and social isolation), then the potentates of the leagues (plus the U.S. Olympic Committee, national governing bodies, NASCAR, PGA, etc.) should band together like rock stars doing Live Aid. They should harness their influence, activate their combined economies of scale and tackle one of America's biggest issues: the declining physical fitness of our country.

Why? Because physical fitness correlates to mental fitness and a healthier populace. If you work in this industry, you should ask what you and your organization are doing to sustain the relevance of sports and the health of your home country.

Maybe we should do what one WNBA exec calmly suggested: We should think about helping sports "regain its relevance."

In some ways, the NBA has already started. In May, the NBA announced it would launch a $100 million reading campaign to create reading centers, literacy programs, educational workshops and online learning programs.

If other leagues, governing bodies, networks and sponsors don't follow suit, it's possible the living room will be to America what the bathhouses were to the Romans. The Empire had too many creature comforts to get off the couch when it mattered.

Since boys, for the moment, are pretty hooked on Tomb Raider and Madden 2001, I'm hoping the WNBA and WUSA can step up and save us. They at least can inspire girls to keep our industry healthy for the immediate future.

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

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