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Baseball had better learn the new 3 R's

RICK BURTON

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I was flipping through John Helyar's wonderful book "Lords of the Realm" the other day and was struck by the following line about the 1968 season: "The game's profound slump was underscored by the retirement of one of its greatest legends and box-office draws, Mickey Mantle."

Reading that, I wondered about the year ahead for the current Lords of Baseball. Despite his "niceness" as a man, I fear Commissioner Bud Selig's posse may be overlooking three important R's:

- n The potential recession that looms large on America's horizon.
- n The retirements of Cal Ripken Jr., Tony Gwynn and possibly Mark McGwire.
- n The Lords' relaxed attitude toward L, M and N (Labor, Marketing and Nationalism).

It's not that Selig is doing a bad job. Or that this terrorism-interrupted year of 2001 could ever be considered a 1968-style slump. Not with the wonderful fireworks provided by Barry Bonds, Ichiro Suzuki and Roger Clemens.

But what if MLB's owners, who are to meet in Chicago Tuesday for the first time since mid-June, aren't ready for the coming storm? And, despite the horror of Sept. 11, what if even half of the teams make the mistake of thinking it's business as usual this off-season?

On the issue of the potential recession, don't blink — we're in one. Forget about when the Fed announces gross domestic product data. Consumer confidence is already hunkering down in the tornado shelter.

Forget about the ways teams previously bickered about financial disparity. It won't matter whether you're a big-market or small-market team, because advertisers and sponsors are planning their 2002 budgets with an eye toward protecting bonuses and the bottom line.

But don't forget MLB's beautiful fans (who again bought roughly 72 million tickets). Y'all better understand the economy's new price sensitivity and the concept of "declinism." When team telemarketers call during dinner next month to renew season packages, rich fans and poor fans alike might challenge the elastic nature of baseball pricing.

As of this very moment, teams are trying to renew season-ticket packages and luxury boxes. If owners are raising prices (as most of them have done aggressively for the last 10 non-recession years), then somebody

better haul them into a conference room and get upside their heads in a hurry. Multigame packages, luxury suites, better seat locations — all of it and none of it — may matter if folks have to take care of the rent first.

Hear me clearly. I'm not saying we're going to stay in a recession. I'm just saying the current Lords better clearly understand the economic conditions their loyal fans are now trying to understand. 2002 won't look like 1999 for a lot of reasons. So don't try to party (or sell) like it's 1999.

Retirement of major players takes place every year, so Opening Day 2002 may stand as uneventfully as any other year. But in an era when few players stay with the same team for an entire career, the creation of heroes is certainly more complex.

In addition, many of baseball's biggest names (as perhaps is always the case) are 32 or older and increasingly meaning less and less to the Skateboarding Nation. Bonds, Clemens, Sammy Sosa, Bernie Williams, Randy Johnson and a host of others are not getting younger and will logically exit the game in less than five years.

Stated simply, baseball has got to anoint the new studs of the game and get them the type of visibility they had going a few years ago for Ken Griffey Jr., Derek Jeter and Alex Rodriguez. And if MLB won't pay for it, then cut deals with the Nikes, Gatorades, Cokes and McDonald's so the new guys get some attention.

Lastly, on the issue of relaxing around the L, M and N. Let's face it. Baseball is a wonderful game, played by wonderful people. But the past Lords went the wrong way on television (they got schooled by the NFL) and now find they offer a lot of local and regional telecasts but not enough national ones to sustain the long-term health or interest of the networks.

Here are the new R's to think about.

Get the labor issue resolved so the news is good, get the marketing reinvigorated so the vibe is phat and get the national back in national pastime so the country can refresh itself next summer. Figure out how to get more people involved with the game at the grassroots level and get rid of anything that smells of strife, disharmony or greed. Do whatever it takes to get the World Series ratings back over a 17.

Remember, baseball is cool. Chicks dig the long ball. Kids love hot dogs and might love your fancy new stadiums if you can get them in there. So don't let it get away from you.

And while I'm at it, think about building skateboard parks on your precious real estate before you lose another generation.

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

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