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If it's not the shoes, it's gotta be the (leather) ball

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RICK BURTON

Do you remember that classic Nike commercial with film director Spike Lee playing the marvelously named Mars Blackmon, with NBA legend Michael Jordan alongside?

The ad opened with the two men standing in a darkened arena. Mars is shouting at MJ about what makes Michael the best player in the universe.

"Is it the vicious dunks?" Mars asks.

Jordan says no.

Mars goes on to pepper the greatest basketball player ever about whether it's his haircut, his shoes, his extra-long shorts or his short socks. Jordan keeps denying it's any of those.

Finally, Mars, in desperation, says — in one of the all-time great copywriter lines — "Money, it's gotta be the shoes."

Turns out, they were all wrong.

It was the ball. It was the ball that made Jordan so great.

Or, at least that's my new view from Australia, where I serve as the commissioner of the National Basketball League, known to our fans in Sydney, Singapore, Auckland and Adelaide as the Philips Championship.

I'm now convinced it was the ball.

That's because the players who stand on the shoulders of the giant (Michael Jordan) — guys like Shaquille O'Neal, LeBron James and Dwyane Wade — are saying the ball makes a big difference. And the new one, the ball the NBA introduced at the start of this season to its future hall of famers and endorsers of colas, cookies and chips, bounces funny and, in the words of Jon Bon Jovi, is slippery when wet.



So I ask this: Who among us can doubt the stars paid to play the game at the Outcry from NBA players led highest level? Commissioner David Stern to

dump the composite ball.

I must admit I followed the NBA ball controversy with more than a slight degree of interest and familiarity. I had faced this dilemma on virtually my first day in the NBL office in July 2003.

As I remember, I had just sat down at my desk when the phone rang. It was one of our owners telling me in no uncertain terms that I needed leather balls. I thought he was talking about intestinal fortitude, but it was actually a commentary on our game ball.

You see, my predecessor had switched to what Spalding now calls microfiber composite the season before, and some of our star players had seen minuscule decreases in their shooting percentages.

As the new kid on the block and not wanting to rock the boat, house or vote with an early-game no-call, I made the unyielding decision to switch back to leather. This made our players happy but didn't please our ball supplier, Molten, for a number of reasons.

The first was that kids buying basketballs want to own the authentic ball used by the pros. The problem with leather balls at retail is their cost: It's much higher than plastic, rubber or composites. In the end, many sporting goods stores or chains don't see much demand for leather balls and dislike sacrificing shelf space for products that may move slowly.

The second problem was manufacturing and that cost. As the official supplier to the NBL and FIBA, Molten provides every team with a fixed number of balls for practice and games. Obviously, the year before, they had been able to cut material costs in Australia, and now their budget would take a slight hit.

The third problem — and I am not insensitive to this — was the actual use of leather and the fact that some consumers are opposed to any product, in any category, that comes from animals, trees or off-shore labor.

For NBA Commissioner David Stern, I'm guessing that the three reasons above played some role in his decision at the start of the season, and that the exacting input of his current players influenced his decision to reverse course and bring back the leather ball in January.

But that's what makes Stern one of the great commissioners of all time. He listens to his various constituents, be they sponsors or suppliers, owners, players, media members or hot-dog sellers.

I can tell you from firsthand experience that it is not an easy task. The fact that Stern has been quoted as saying "In hindsight, we [the NBA] could have done a better job" is an amazing notation.

Further, Stern has gone on to say, "With respect to the ball, I take responsibility for that."

In Australia, someone who owns up to his own decision is "fair dinkum." It means the person is genuine, authentic and trustworthy.

From a distance, I can say that David Stern possesses all of those traits and unfailingly places the interests of his players and owners at the top of his many to-do lists.

As a side note to Nike Chairman Phil Knight and ad agency Wieden & Kennedy: I can only suggest that maybe Nike needs to get Michael and Mars back in the arena. I can see a beautiful cut-away shot where Mars turns to the camera and says, "Money, it's gotta be the shoes ... and the ball."

Rick Burton, Former executive director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center, is the commissioner of the National Basketball League.

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