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Party favors for sports: Strong USOC, spectacular World Cup

RICK BURTON & NORM O'REILLY

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RICK BURTON

We were sitting in a faculty meeting recently when, partway through, the annual holiday party was announced. With Hanukkah, Las Posadas, Christmas, Kwanzaa, Human Rights Day, National Cocoa Day and Boxing Day all taking place in December, we were happy that a celebration — not to mention end of term — was imminent. As with all parties, the pressing issue was, What to bring?



NORM O'REILLY

Imagine if this invitation had gone out to the niche world of executives running the sports business industry. What gifts would you give out? Who would you give them to?

After all, there are so many deserving groups with significant wish lists. After the disappointment of the Chicago 2016 bid, how would you cheer up the U.S. Olympic Committee? With the world about to come to their doorstep, what — if anything — does Vancouver 2010 really need? Can we afford to give the NFL what it doesn't dare ask for?

Well, nothing was stopping us ... so we reached into our goodie closets (back behind the books, research papers and ungraded tests) and dug out the following:

For the USOC: A new CEO well-versed in the international politics of the International Olympic Committee and international federations that drive the IOC's agenda. This person will be capable of running a not-for-profit like a business while concurrently serving a stakeholder list that de facto includes the American government, 40-plus national governing bodies, an unusual and passionate board of directors, and a global media machine that generally finds most USOC decisions lacking.

For Vancouver 2010: We debated giving them good weather in the form of plentiful snow for Whistler and starry nights and sunny days for Vancouver but ultimately settled on a protest-free Games and Canada's first gold medal while hosting the Games. (Both Montreal 1976 and Calgary 1988 saw no gold for the home team.)

For the NFL: Courage ... and by that we mean the courage to recognize that the emerging brain injury issue is only one class-action lawsuit away from threatening the very fabric of America's (if not the world's) most powerful sports league. Like doping, and gambling before it, this issue has the potential to attract the media, scientists and skeptics en masse. And, as the "big dog," the NFL is a target, and a target that probably will face

this issue alone — despite other sports like the NHL, NASCAR and pro rodeo all using helmets. Our gift of courage is one that will allow the NFL to proactively do all it can to address an issue many sports will benefit from and to actively work to reduce concussions and long-term cranial damage in all of football (including soccer).

For the city of Toronto and surrounding area: Interest, passion and support from its 5 million-plus citizens to support and make the most of the recently awarded 2015 Pan Am Games. Although many view this multisport event as a second-tier Games, it is just this opportunity that can showcase Toronto to the world and allow it to bring the Summer Olympics back to North America in the 2020s.

For NBC: A gift-wrapped deal with Comcast that allows one of the Olympic movement's greatest supporters, Dick Ebersol, a chance to stay in the game.

For the Cleveland Cavaliers: Knowledge and stamina to help LeBron James realize that achieving his personal goal of becoming a billion-dollar athlete requires not living and playing in the biggest local market (New York) but rather making Cleveland bigger than all (markets) and respected by all. If Michael Jordan could do this for Chicago, then LeBron can make it happen for Cleveland.

For the NHL: An Olympic tournament of epic proportions that justifies the interruption of its season and brings international attention to the great game of ice hockey.

For Lindsey Vonn: Five superb races in Vancouver for U.S. Skiing's golden girl that deliver to Dick Ebersol and NBC a five-part miniseries herding viewers to their TVs much the way Michael Phelps did from Beijing.

For North American motorsports fans: A Formula One race in North America again. One of the world's most popular sports is absent from the continent. With luck, and many millions, it will return to Quebec in 2011.



GETTY IMAGES

Holiday wish for Lindsey Vonn: An impact in Vancouver comparable to Phelps in Beijing.

For Tiger Woods: A December that ends with him knowing that his sponsors and fans will stand by him as he summons the courage to deal with the worst of the world's media coverage and, unfortunately, its capacity for excess.

For the NCAA: A formula that lets them create a fair and deeper playoff structure to determine the national champion in football but that also enables its legendary bowl games to continue as important landmark sports events.

For David Stern: A plane full of international billionaires who want to start NBA franchises outside the borders of the USA.

For South Africa: That hosting the 2010 World Cup will be all they dreamed it would be ... including further removing apartheid from life and mind.

For Don Garber and Sunil Gulati: Fortitude to help U.S. Soccer bring the 2022 FIFA World Cup to America. The U.S. no longer hosts the world very often, and this is one of the best events ever. Plus, it will help MLS all along the way.

For President Barack Obama: Some spare time to work on his cross-over dribble and for Americans to realize how much this president cherishes the value of sports.

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