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Teams of one playing a losing game

RICK BURTON

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A few months ago I was at the Pre-Olympic Congress in Brisbane, Australia, and told some delegates from around the world that an interesting demolition derby might be coming soon to a country near them. I called it the speedy vectoring of American youth sport participation and global technology.

My global warning suggests that when certain professional sports trends (increasing ticket prices, increases in the number of luxury boxes/seats and frequent work stoppages) are married with advancements in technology, team sports may lose some of their relevance.

Further, if those trends continue unchecked in the United States, it is possible to project a decline in America's fabled team sports culture that might lead to increases in childhood obesity, school violence and social isolationism.

Said another way, as fewer Americans play football, baseball and basketball, those sports may be replaced by street sports and interactive technology where individuals frequently participate alone or against themselves.

Members of the U.S. Senate heard testimony in March from David Walsh, president of the National Institute on Media and the Family. He suggested that as "technology advances, each generation of violent games becomes more graphic and extreme." Additional research presented by Walsh found a "positive correlation between real-life aggressive behavior and violent video play."

Sport may be a cultural cornerstone of American society, but my research was initiated with the supposition that children ages 5-14 were playing fewer team sports. My hunches were driven by the increasing cost of attending professional sports events and the continuing disenfranchisement of young fans and families. When I looked around, the baseball diamonds were empty and the children were riding skateboards or using in-line skates. They weren't on the fields.

Preliminary research supported some of that concern. In the last 10 years, the cost of attending professional sports has risen much faster than the consumer price index. During that decade of lockouts and prime time, the rate of inflation grew approximately 20 to 25 percent while tickets for MLB, NBA, NFL and NHL skyrocketed. I could give you the specific numbers, but who among us would care? We are all sufficiently tired of the story that connects the salaries of the players, the total number of strikes or lockouts and increased ticket prices.

But, here's the nugget. I started by researching one city. Emerald Kidsports is a nonprofit organization responsible for running youth sports leagues for the cities of Eugene and Springfield, Ore. They recently provided me data that showed team sports (football, soccer, basketball, baseball, volleyball and softball) participation trends grew considerably until 1995-96. Then, total enrollments dropped more than 12 percent over the next two years. The numbers have never returned to their 1995-96 perch.

Two areas intrigued me:

The first was recognizing that Major League Baseball's last players strike had taken place in August 1994. In 1993, with 28 teams, baseball drew 70.2 million fans. In the season-shortened strike year, the number dropped to 50 million. In 1995, it stayed at 50 million.

Clearly, during that two-year span baseball damaged its own reputation — and possibly that of all organized team sports. Before the decade ended, the NHL and NBA had their own work stoppages. The message sent by the players and owners to the masses was: We don't need to play these games. Find something else to do. Clearly, the fans did.

Second, I analyzed the penetration of home computer and video game cartridge use. Interestingly, the numbers again pointed to 1993-95 as a watershed period.

Sega Genesis was introduced in 1989 and by 1992, with the inclusion of Super NES, there were almost 9 million game console units in American homes. In 1993, the market more than tripled to 28.5 million. By 1995, the year after the baseball strike, Sony unveiled the PlayStation and, with Sega's Saturn included, the electronic game market reached almost 30 million new units sold.

In 1996, Nintendo 64 was introduced as Sony pushed aggressive marketing of its PlayStation. The video and computer game industry continued its pursuit of youth awareness, trial and dedicated usage. Professional sport was primed for a hostile takeover and the silky raider was technology games.

Suddenly, kids stayed inside to play electronically. Mothers knew their children were safe. Interactive computer activities implied they were truly modernized. There were no physical injuries and no known security risks.

What many parents didn't see coming was that *Myst* and *Combat Flight Simulator* had, in many cases, replaced the baseball glove or the football. The new "teams" of choice were not the Yankees and Giants; they were Microsoft and Electronic Arts.

With the accessibility of the Internet truly taking flight in 1996, a number of curious facts emerged. According to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, in 1996, only 20 percent of all 12- to 17-year-olds were involved "frequently" in physical fitness activities. More significant, for that same age cohort, team sport participation fell markedly. Soccer (-17 percent), softball (-17 percent), hard surface volleyball (-14 percent), hockey (-11 percent), tackle football (-10 percent) and baseball (-3 percent) all declined that year.

Sports Illustrated recently referenced a Michigan State University study from the early 1990s that suggested 70 percent of the 20 million American children who "participate in organized sports" will quit before the age of 13. Most of the defectors suggest their parents or adults were making "the playing of the games a joyless, negative experience."

That same article also cited the National Alliance for Youth Sports as suggesting that by 1999, a child could expect 15 percent of the parents or adults at a youth sports event to become violent or abusive toward the players, coaches or officials.

Obviously, these trends cannot be laid solely on Major League Baseball and the 1994 strike. While it is America's largest spectator sport and sold more than 72 million tickets in 2000, MLB is not causing children to

stay inside. Similarly, the electronic game companies cannot be faulted for designing graphically exciting products.

However, if American professional sports leagues and parents do not take a proactive role in facilitating positive youth experiences with team sports, business skills such as leadership, teamwork and physical reliability may be lost to future generations.

Additionally, unsupervised technology play may usher forth an America where, in the absence of attractive outdoor team sport activities, children are larger, slower and potentially more violent. Since we know physical activity (i.e., sport) leads to a healthier, more productive life, the onus for addressing these trends falls on many shoulders.

Meanwhile, if a holiday gift-giving is in your immediate future, you might think about giving a child a game of catch instead of the latest software.

The squeals of joy might not be the same, but you might be saving America and the world.

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