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Violence in sport appalling and appealing

RICK BURTON

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In the Marketing Sports Properties class I teach at the University of Oregon, we spent some time doing a case study on the NHL. As we talked about the league's various components (ticket sales, broadcast ratings, sponsors, youth initiatives), we casually touched upon the subject of violence in sport.

During one point in the discussion, I suggested that, while it may be politically incorrect for anyone to admit publicly, the potential for in-game, on-ice fighting probably holds high appeal for various NHL fans.

That shouldn't surprise most readers since sport, in its earliest forms, was often a preparation for war or battle. In fact, the original Olympic Games were staged for Greece's warrior elite and kept them from killing each other for a while.

Abstractist that I am, I used that thought to bring up Steven Pressfield's superb book "Gates of Fire" (which is hereby placed on the sports leadership required reading list).

In "Gates of Fire," Pressfield, who also wrote "The Legend of Bagger Vance," brutally details the Greek battle of Thermopylae (480 B.C.) and explains how the Spartans actively prepared for war. If you read it, you will see amazing similarities to how the modern football team designs its preseason training. War was indeed raw.

At this point in our classroom discussion, it was easy to jump off the NHL and move to the rawmeisters at the World Wrestling Federation and their new creation, the XFL. Many of the students had seen the NBC promotional spots that ran during the baseball playoffs and commented on the XFL's use of explosions, balls of fire and that immense wrecking ball smashing into the "no-fair-catches" punt returner.

Clearly, the XFL, in attacking either the NBA (NBC's other February league) or the NFL, wanted the viewing public to know it was upping the ante on physical play. Since it was coming from the mad geniuses that gave you the Rock and Mankind, it was easy for the class to theorize a potential trend toward greater violence in professional sport.

Unfortunately for all of us, the sports world provides that fodder fairly frequently. Hadn't we just gotten the court findings in Vancouver on the Marty McSorley high-sticking trial? Isn't that the NFL's Rae Carruth up in the box for a murder trial?

Lastly (but maybe just for the moment), wasn't that Roger Clemens, who previously beamed Mike Piazza, throwing splintered bat parts at the Mets catcher during the World Series?

Yes, yes and yes. But so what? Our society features many degrees of violence. Sport, which is a cornerstone of modern Western culture, reflects that element of man (and woman) the animal. Evolution theory suggests the strong have adapted and survived. The Cro-Magnons couldn't go to their left and didn't make the cut.

But here's the rub. Violence that touches the young and the innocent is often harmful. So who draws the line of what is good and what is unacceptable? The leagues? The networks? The advertisers? The parents? The schools? The government?

Hard to say.

If violence makes the ratings go back up (in this "fragmentized environment" we keep hearing about), then a lot of folks might look the other way. Maybe players won't get ejected in the new leagues but instead get rewarded. Maybe they'll get a game created for them by EA Sports, Nintendo or Sony.

Maybe media buyers at FCB, BBDO, DMB&B and Wieden & Kennedy will get attractive commissions for finding the sport properties that deliver certain, hard-to-reach demos. That would be the young male (12-24) who currently is not watching a lot of televised team sport programming.

I don't know what the right answer is on this one. I'm against excessive violence.

But the other night at the Oregon-Arizona football game, a Duck hit a Wildcat so hard the Arizona player's helmet flew about 15 feet up in the air.

The crowd I heard thought it was a great hit and cheered the replay enthusiastically. They also clapped respectfully when the injured Wildcat bravely walked off the field and headed straight to a hospital to get stitched up.

But what if he hadn't gotten up? How far removed are we from encouraging the Roman gladiators of A.D. 80 (the year the Colosseum was built)? To some degree, it looks like we still care whether the heavily favored Lions cover the spread against the underdog Christians.

I dunno. Trends are funny things. That's why I brought it up with the industry's future leaders. In a few years, they'll have to make that call. As sports marketers they'll have to determine what sport activities create compelling exchange.

What do you think?

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

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