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1-15-2001

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Rick Burton
Syracuse University

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Recommended Citation

Burton, R. (2001), "Where is the prophetic minority that can see the future?" *Sports Business Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 39, January 15-21, 30.

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SBJ/January 15 - 21, 2001/Opinion

Where is the prophetic minority that can see the future?

RICK BURTON

Published January 15, 2001

A couple months ago at church, I heard a line that really intrigued me. It was tossed out in a Sunday sermon and the words were something like: "Where is the prophetic minority?" It was a phrase used to identify those rare individuals who see the big picture before it develops.

Kinda like the way the NBA's Magic Johnson or Larry Bird could see every player on the floor and know where a pass should go before the cutter even broke for the hoop. Like the way Dennis Rodman knew where a missed shot would go before the ball even left the shooter's hand. Or the way Wayne Gretzky or Michael Jordan knew their shot would go in because they had their "eyes on the prize."

I wondered, as I sat in the pew, where the prophetic minority for the sports business was hanging out? Who were they and where did they live?

Who were the visionaries who could already see the sports future unlike any others? Were they SportsBusiness Journal's Forty Under 40? Were they the current league commissioners or their counterparts in the various players unions? Were they technology wizards or global media magnates?

It's a curious question we all should be asking. In many ways, the sports business now stands at a variety of crossroads. As an industry, we're old enough to know right from wrong, good from bad. But like teen-agers, we're still young enough to do really stupid things.

Said another way, I don't think the sports industry is still in its infancy. We've come too far in the last 100 years. But given the various headlines I read (especially in this publication), I know we're not exactly mature either.

That said, have we found someone to solve the long-term problems like those facing baseball in America or hockey in Canada? Can we get our arms around the network TV ratings decline fast enough to prevent the Athens Olympics from looking like Sydney? Can we keep any of the dot.coms still in business today from folding tomorrow? Can we keep paying athletes \$25 million a year without passing the residual damages on to the fans? Can we keep kids interested in our primary revenue-producing sports and keep them actively involved?

Great questions all. But here are some better ones. Who at your organization is thinking about:

Mass customization?

- Cross-functional partnerships?
- Distribution models and economies of scale?
- Digital dissemination of information (content conversion)?
- Audience or customer erosion?
- Global market penetration and eventual market maturity?
- Mass cynicism connected to soaring financial statements?
- Fan avidity and emotional attachment to the sport, league, teams or players?
- Erosion of sport's perceived purity (over-commercialization)?
- True diversification of opportunities?

Wow. That's a tough batch of vague issues. And let's be honest. Most of us aren't charged with solving those problems. We're just wondering where to eat lunch or dinner.

But who is thinking about the big picture? Are you laying the whole thing off on the NBA's David Stern, Russ Granik, Adam Silver and Heidi Ueberroth? Gary Bettman, Jon Litner, Alysse Soll, Doug Perlman and Ed Horne at the NHL? The NFL's Paul Tagliabue, Roger Goodell, John Collins, Jim Schwebel, Doug Quinn, Steve Phelps, Tom Spock and Chris Russo? MLS chief Don Garber? Dick Ebersol, Jonathan Miller and Gary Zenkel at NBC Sports? Hank Adams and Gordon Kane at Ignite Sports Media? Or is it Craig Tartasky, the czar of the Sports Summit? Mario Lemieux? John Elway?

Don't know all those names? Unfamiliar with what positions they hold? Isn't it funny that prophets are never recognized in their own homelands.

By the way, it's not by accident that I saved the diversification point for last in the list above or earlier borrowed a biblical phrase once uttered by Dr. Martin Luther King. Keeping our eyes on the prize is a coded message for many readers.

February is Black History Month and whether you like the word "minority" or not, we, as an industry, must move much more aggressively toward diversity in leadership opportunities and placement of African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, female-Americans and non-Americans.

Some of you old cowboys may write me off for making that startling suggestion. But the truth is, the prophetic minority for the sports industry may be a true minority.

Either way, somebody out there probably already recognizes where the ball must go and who should take the last shot.

My guess is that if we all want to stay in the ball game (and continue making boatloads of cash helping grown men and women play children's games), then we better start providing some serious playing time to the folks who "get it." If you've got one of those players on your bench, it's time to put them in the starting lineup.

The game clock on the digital revolution is already running.

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

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