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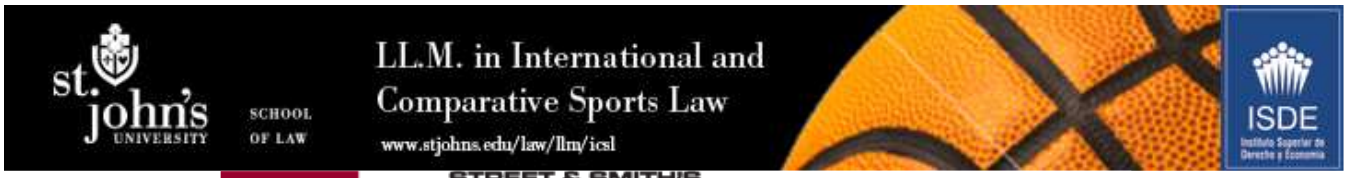

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Larger-than-life athletes must come down to earth occasionally

RICK BURTON

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I was sitting in my office recently wondering about the differences between pro basketball in America and Australia.

The cause? A blogger had reported that Kevin Durant, the ESPN NCAA Player of the Year and the No. 2 pick in the 2007 NBA draft, was debating whether to take $30 million from Nike or $40 million from Adidas to endorse shoes.

As it turned out, Durant reportedly declined a $70 million deal with Adidas and signed a seven-year, $60 million deal with Nike, which would make it one of the largest footwear deals of all time.

In Australia, Nike's original $30 million would have bought every single National Basketball League team and thereby provided the new owner of the NBL with a league on two continents featuring 13 teams in three countries (Australia, New Zealand and Singapore).

Imagine, 30 years of basketball heritage in markets like Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth, plus recent entry in markets such as Auckland, Singapore and Gold Coast, all for half the price of one American's shoes.

That's amazing, but, hey, Durant is obviously an educated student of what the market will bear. Like M.J., A.I., LeBron, Carmelo, Kobe and Shaq before him, Durant and his agent understood the art of the deal and the art of leverage.

Seattle SuperSonics rookie Kevin Durant signed a seven-year, $60 million deal with Nike. But will the endorsement contract allow the No. 2 NBA draft pick time to connect with fans?

I used to teach at the University of Oregon's Warsaw Sports Marketing Center and frequently lectured grad students about economies of scale and return on investment. I'm sure they will be wondering if Nike's basketball honchos got a good deal and the right leverage. Nike will have to move a lot of shoes and inspire a lot of kids.

Funny thing that concept of inspiration. The player has to perform and the kids have to watch him, and in this day and age, seeing a player in person is pretty rare. That's another point of difference between the U.S. and Australia.

Down here in the Down Under, all of our NBL players are required to make personal appearances on behalf of the game and work with kids in person.

I wonder how many kids will get within 50 feet of Durant during his NBA career. Our industry mustn't let the dollars and deals get in the way of bringing the game directly to the kids.

While league commissioners and team CMOs are forced to deal with discussions on content production and data distribution, it will trouble me if, in the digital revolution, we ever lose the chance to create human inspiration in person. Kids still need periodic, even random, contact with their heroes.

Our Web site (www.nbl.com.au) made this issue clear to me when we ran a story noting that the Wollongong Hawks (2001 NBL champs) had kicked off their community programs for this season by holding a successful school holiday clinic at Illawarra Sports High School.

The clinic was for children between the ages of 6 and 13 and was built around games and activities. More than 70 children attended the one-day clinic and received pointers from the Hawks' Australian players along with American head coach Eric Cooks and his assistant Kevin Brooks.

These professionals, working like modern-day Johnny Appleseeds, were planting the seeds for the game. They participated in skill activities and then signed autographs afterward.

It seemed so refreshing. It seemed to be about the game and getting kids to play ball.

I'm reading Tom Callahan's wonderful book "Johnny U," wherein he describes what it was like for people from Baltimore to attend the Colts' summer training camp in the '60s and sit on the hillside at Westminster watching Unitas and Raymond Berry stay after practice to work on sideline drills.

From my time working in Wisconsin, I know that Green Bay kids used to carry the helmets of the Packers' players after Vince Lombardi put Bart Starr, Paul Hornung, Fuzzy Thurston, Jerry Kramer and their teammates through their paces.

Callahan captures the very vibe of the era when he writes, "The time was different. The players lived next door to the fans, literally. There wasn't a financial gulf, a cultural gulf or any other kind of gulf between them. Except for a dozen Sundays a year, the Colts were occupied in the usual and normal pursuits of happiness."

He follows that by noting, "In an annual visit to every locker room in the league, the Philadelphia-based commissioner of the NFL, DeBenneville 'Bert' Bell, emphasized the virtue of community. He told [players] that if you're going to play professional football in a town, you have to live in that town, really live there. Otherwise, he said, don't play."

Yes, I know times have changed, but I hope Durant's new employers will allow him (or encourage him) to create periodic access with kids, and not just sponsors.

It's such a whirlwind these days for the NBA players after they are drafted. There are press conferences, photo shoots, grueling practices, dinners with shoe reps and corporate meet-and-greets. It can't possibly be easy to find time for the kids.

In Australia, the dollars are a lot different. Thankfully, we still have player contracts requiring NBL players to make a significant number of personal appearances and to work with the kids in schools and at local basketball associations.

The NBA has a number of community and social responsibility programs, like "NBA Cares." And while there are requirements for players to make a number of appearances each season, specific events are not mandatory.

That's why my hope from a distance is that Durant and his associates find the time to visit with the kids, who are the ultimate keepers of the flame.

Rick Burton is the commissioner of the National Basketball League. On Oct. 1, he will become the chief marketing officer of the U.S. Olympic Committee.

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